掟上今日子の設計図

西尾維新

NISIOISIN

Illustration /VOFAN

残り9時間！
爆破を止められるのか!?

仕掛けられた爆弾はどこに。
今日子さんと爆破予告犯
『學藝員901O』の
頭脳戦開始！

眠るたびに記憶を失う忘却探偵、
タイムリミットミステリー最新作！

講談社

掟上今日子の設計図

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Kodansha

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The Blueprint of Kyoko Okitegami

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Translation: waifutime

[redacted]

掟上今日子の設計図

[redacted]

The Blueprint of Kyoko Okitegami

1

What appeared on the screen was nothing more than an ordinary multi-story parking garage.

A plain, four-story motor pool where cars could be parked even on the rooftop. You wondered why such a dull video, posted by someone with the username "curator-9010," was currently the second most-watched today, just behind a video titled "Three Kittens Sleeping, Using Each Other as Pillows"—but that question was quickly answered.

The parking garage was suddenly engulfed in flames.

Was it a fire? No, it was an explosion—from the inside.

You leaned forward in your chair, thinking it might be a teaser for an upcoming movie or some kind of promotional stunt. But just as you do, the screen abruptly cut to a new scene with a rough edit. The new image showed a person, heavily disguised in a dirty ski outfit, including a ski hat, goggles covering their eyes, and a scarf wrapped around their mouth—an extremely anonymous figure.

Of course, they weren't a skier.

"How was it? My work of art?"

A heavily processed voice played. It was hard to understand, but thankfully, the video had subtitles. Now that you thought about it, the sound of the explosion in the parking garage part was cleanly muted.

The video was clearly homemade, likely crafted using a smartphone camera app, with a rough, amateurish feel. Yet, despite the clumsy execution, there was a surprising attention to detail that kept you watching. Then, just as you were glued to the screen, the person in the video continued, "But that was just a greeting."

"With an explosive of the exact same scale as the one you just saw, I will blow up the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art today. The deadline is 8 PM, the museum’s closing time. I strongly advise all visitors to evacuate quickly."

After saying this, the person slightly adjusted the camera, revealing a glimpse of a building in the background. Was that the museum they’re talking about? It seemed the footage was filmed late at night, and now they were planning to plant a time bomb in that building.

Then, as if suddenly remembering something,

"I am 'QRETA 9010.' "

The highly anonymous person introduced themselves—if you could even call that an introduction.

"Please stop me. Whether it’s the police, a detective, or even you, the viewer of this video. Someone, please stop me."

Hurry up and stop me.

And with that, the video abruptly ended—it was barely a minute long. But when you checked, you saw that this video, blandly titled "Demonstration," had just surpassed "Three Kittens Sleeping, Using Each Other as Pillows" and jumped to first place.

This was a big deal.

2

Officer Yura muttered, "It’s a wonder no one died," as he looked up at the charred remains of the multi-story parking garage. From the first floor to the rooftop, the entire garage was scorched black. From a distance, it was clear that the cars parked inside were nothing more than wrecks, the scene one of utter devastation.

It wasn’t just a bomb; it looked as if a missile had struck the place. Given the state of things, it was beyond strange that there were zero casualties; it was nothing short of a miracle.

"We were lucky with the timing, I guess. This parking garage is shared by several companies in the area and is used exclusively by their employees," explained Officer Haraki, Officer Yura's partner, who had arrived at the scene earlier. It made sense—there might be a reason behind the miracle that all the drivers had escaped with their lives, although it wasn’t yet clear how many cars had been destroyed.

But that didn’t mean they could breathe a sigh of relief—the person who blew up this parking garage had brazenly announced their next target. And they did it on the Internet, no less.

Among the crowd gathered at a distance, staring at the charred parking garage, there were likely many who had rushed over after watching the video.

(But after watching that video, would anyone really want to head to the 'next target'...?)

The Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art, right? Preventing that place from becoming the "next site" was Officer Yura's job, and that's why he was waiting here...

"Can we go inside yet? Considering there's a time limit, I'd like to start the investigation immediately if possible."

"It's not safe yet... Ah, but it looks like they're done. Look."

Prompted by his partner, Officer Yura looked over to see a woman casually stepping out of the charred parking garage—more precisely, a woman and two dogs.

She was dressed simply in a pair of ripped jeans and a blue shirt. The jeans were so torn that only about half of the fabric remained. With long hair, a model-like slim figure, and large sunglasses covering her face, she held a Golden Retriever by its leash in her left hand and a Doberman in her right. This wasn't a casual morning dog walk, but a crime scene investigation. At only 29 years old, she was the ace of the bomb squad, Assistant Officer Azana Tobirai—though not both dogs were police bomb-sniffing dogs.

The Golden Retriever was a guide dog.

A few years ago, Assistant Officer Tobirai lost her eyesight while handling an explosive device. At the time, everyone thought she would retire, but astonishingly, it was after that incident that she became the true ace of the bomb squad.

Walking confidently through dangerous areas with her two canine partners, Assistant Officer Tobirai was affectionately nicknamed "Double Dog Azana" by her colleagues.

(Um, what were their names again…? The Golden Retriever is Extension, and the Doberman is Manicure, right? Or was it the other way around?)

As Officer Yura was trying to remember, Assistant Officer Tobirai, guided by either Extension or Manicure, approached him quickly—her stride was brisk.

"It's all clear. I walked around from the first floor to the rooftop, and there are no more explosives inside. The fire was more dramatic than the explosion itself because of all the gas tanks on-site, but it seems there's no danger of collapse. However, the sprinklers have made the floor extremely slippery, so please watch your step, Officer Yura."

Did she just express concern about his footing while wearing those high heels, the only assertive element in her simple attire? It made him feel like a failure as an on-site commander. Officer Yura might have said he wanted to get inside as soon as possible, but he certainly didn't have the guts to enter a potential bomb site by himself—he felt as if she had sharply pointed that out.

And he was once again impressed by the woman, who reported her findings to him with such certainty, even though he hadn't said a word to indicate he actually was Officer Yura—rumor had it that she might possess a sense of smell as sharp as her canine partners.

"For reference, the explosive device seemed to have been placed in a van in the central area on the second floor, third from the right and fourth from the left—there are remnants, so please confirm with a visual inspection."

"You can tell all that? You're amazing, Assistant Officer Tobirai."

Officer Haraki, who was genuinely impressed, exclaimed with a childlike awe, but she, without a hint of modesty, gestured towards her two partners. "Please direct your praise to these two."

"I simply followed their lead."

"Ah, um—"

Officer Haraki, seemingly unsure of how to respond, appeared intimidated by the two dogs, which were larger than the typical Golden Retriever and Doberman.

"It’s fine. Even though Manicure is a bomb-sniffing police dog, he's very calm, and Extension is a guide dog, not a guard dog," she said in what seemed to be a well-rehearsed joke, but Officer Haraki could only muster a vague smile. Both dogs were so well-trained that they neither barked nor showed any signs of aggression. Apparently, the Golden Retriever was indeed Extension, and the Doberman was Manicure. For Officer Yura, who was single and lived alone, these were unfamiliar terms, so no matter how many times he heard them, they didn’t stick.

"Well then, I’m heading to the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art now. We must find the bomb before it goes off."

It was the kind of statement you'd expect from the ace of the bomb squad—indeed, even if she could pinpoint the exact area where the bomb had exploded, that wouldn’t be enough to claim she’d fulfilled her professional duty. The explosion at the museum was predicted and scheduled for the closing time—8 PM. They had to find the bomb and properly dispose of it before then.

(It's just past 11 AM now, so we’ve got about nine hours until the explosion deadline...)

The evacuation of staff and visitors should already be completed, and the site should be fully secured, but there was still no good news about the bomb being found yet—as the head of the bomb squad, he undoubtedly wanted to send in his ace to begin the search immediately.

Of course, they couldn’t neglect the multi-story parking garage, which seemed to have been blown up just as a warning, if they wanted to catch the culprit. That’s why they had her check this site first, but now that she was done, Assistant Officer Tobirai had to immediately join the main team without a moment’s rest.

"Well then, see you later."

"Do you know how to get to the museum?"

To Officer Haraki’s question, Assistant Officer Tobirai gestured to her canine companions, "Yes. These two will take me"—causing him to nearly fall over.

"Y-You're not planning to go by dog sled, are you!?"

"No, by subway."

3

Once inside, it was worse than expected—perhaps "horrific" would be a better word. For Officer Yura, who had a fondness for cars, it was a sight that was hard to bear—sure, there might not have been any casualties, but the total damage must be unimaginable. There wasn’t a single car that remained unscathed, and even recycling the parts seemed impossible. It was a scene devoid of any eco-friendly spirit.

(And to think they call this a mere 'demonstration'—outrageous.)

"What could possibly be the aim of 'QRETA 9010' for doing something like this?"

Even though Assistant Officer Tobirai, an expert, had guaranteed their safety, Officer Haraki was still clearly unnerved as he cautiously followed Officer Yura, glancing around at the charred aftermath. Officer Yura thought that his partner’s skittish behavior might negatively affect the other investigators, but he could somewhat understand the sentiment. However, he found it unacceptable to refer to the criminal, who created this horrific scene and called it "art," by the ridiculous name "QRETA 9010."

"Just call him a 'perp.' Or a 'scumbag.' There’s no need to call him by the name he wants. What the hell is 'QRETA'? And what’s '9010'?"

"It should be another spelling for "curator", you know, what they call the museum staff who mainly introduce the works there."

"Curator... wasn’t that the username of the person who posted the video?"

"Yes, Officer Yura, you’ve got it right. 'curator-9010.' That’s 'QRETA 9010.' I’d guess that the number '9010' was added to differentiate the username because 'curator' was probably already taken by another user."

"So, it's a meaningless number."

"Though it might be meaningless, it’s likely a play on words. '9010' can be read as 'Kyu-rei-to' in Japanese, which sounds like 'Curatorial.'"

Although Officer Yura found it odd that Officer Haraki, despite his nervous demeanor, could answer such questions so clearly, it seemed that online speculation had already thoroughly discussed this issue.

With the target of the announced bombing being an art museum, some people had even begun to speculate whether the criminal calling themselves "QRETA 9010" might actually be someone related to the art world, or perhaps a curator themselves.

With the crime announcement being made through a video post and the investigation information also being gathered online, Officer Yura, an old-fashioned type of officer, couldn’t help but feel out of place—how much longer could he keep hanging on to this kind of fieldwork?

(Feeling outdated makes me hesitant. Using terms like 'perp' might seem old-fashioned and uncool to youngsters like Haraki—)

Was this a moment where an old man should compromise? Even so, calling the culprit "QRETA 9010" was too long—and it still felt like giving in to the criminal’s wishes, which was annoying.

"When we talk to real museum staff, it would only cause confusion. Let’s just call him '9010.'"

"Understood, Officer Yura."

Officer Haraki, a straightforward young man, agreed.

"So, officer, what do you think the objective of '9010' is? What could be the motive for pulling off such a grand stunt?"

"For now, we can only consider it the work of a thrill-seeker. Despite posting that video, they haven’t made any demands."

"Could it be someone who holds a grudge against the museum?"

"If that were the case, they would’ve blown up the museum from the start—there would be no need for a demonstration. However, it’s possible that '9010' has secretly contacted the museum and is blackmailing them, even if it wasn’t stated in the video. Something like, 'Hand over the valuable paintings or expensive sculptures if you don’t want this place blown up as I warned'—"

Officer Yura hadn’t yet fully investigated what kind of art was being exhibited at the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art, so he could only vaguely speculate. As they talked, they arrived at the central area on the second floor, where Assistant Officer Tobirai had indicated that the bomb was placed.

The bomb had apparently been planted in a vehicle—just considering that made Officer Yura's blood boil, as it felt like an insult to cars. But looking at the scene with that preconception, it certainly seemed to be the epicenter.

Though it wasn't completely obliterated, the van in question was nothing more than the remains of a vehicle—what was left was so melted down that it was hard to believe it had once been a car unless you knew beforehand.

"Assistant Officer Tobirai said the bomb was planted in this... car. So, are you telling me that a single bomb caused this level of catastrophic damage to the entire parking garage? What kind of tremendous explosive power did that bomb have—"

Officer Haraki said, trembling, but Officer Yura thought it might actually be the opposite—if the bomb had been that powerful, the car at the epicenter wouldn't just be reduced to scrap metal; the floor and ceiling in this area might have collapsed as well.

Rather, it seemed the criminal had caused this much damage with a minimal explosion—this multi-story parking garage, which was reportedly almost full at the time of the explosion, was primarily used by employees of neighboring companies. In other words, it was packed with gasoline tanks, so the ignition triggered a chain reaction, making it look like the entire garage exploded at once in the video—in reality, it was likely more of a conflagration than an explosion.

In fact, the fire itself was quickly extinguished by the sprinklers—though the walls were scorched black, once the piles of scrap metal were removed, the parking garage could probably reopen for business as soon as tomorrow. That is, if any companies were still willing to renew their contracts after it had been used for a bomb demonstration...

Even dynamite and hand grenades aren't particularly destructive on their own; it's the blast wave and the resulting debris that amplify the scale of the destruction.

"In the video, '9010' said they would plant a bomb of the same scale, right? So, they're planning to do the same thing at the museum—minimal force for maximum effect?"

"Just like they did to the cars here, are they planning to wipe out all the artworks inside? Maybe there aren't any gasoline tanks scattered around the museum, but they could have some alternative means—what's their goal?"

Thinking it might indeed be a prankster, Officer Yura found himself snapping at his partner—but the young officer of today retorted, "Whatever the purpose, you could say there was a demand, after all."

"Remember? They said, 'Stop me.'"

"Idiot. That wasn’t a demand, it was a provocation."

Police, detectives, or even you—someone, please stop me.

'If, by any chance, that really was a demand, then they didn’t need to say it—we’ll stop you. We’ll stop you for good if we have to.'

"Assistant Officer Tobirai said the bomb was probably planted inside the car, right? So, it was planted under the hood, in the engine compartment?"

"Is there even enough space in the engine compartment? It may be a minimal explosive, but a bomb is still a bomb. It's hard to tell from the wreckage, but since it's a van, wouldn't the cargo area be a better place to plant it?"

That was true. For that matter, it could’ve been planted in the driver’s seat or the passenger seat. All the culprit would need to do is set the timer before the owner returns to the vehicle—it wouldn’t be that difficult to predict, given that this was a contracted parking lot.

"Were there no witnesses? I heard there were no casualties, but were there no parking attendants or security guards at the time of the explosion?"

"Well, it seems that two security guards were stationed in the control room on the first floor at the time of the explosion, but they were called away by an emergency summons from the security company, so they had left the building. Of course, it wasn’t a coincidence. The security company has confirmed that they didn’t issue any such summons."

It couldn’t have been a mere prank call with such perfect timing.

It was clearly the work of '9010'—was it to avoid being seen while planting the bomb? Or perhaps—

"Could it be that '9010' was fixated on ensuring there were no casualties?"

Officer Haraki seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion.

"No matter how much this parking lot was intended for employees only, I don’t think it would be possible to avoid casualties unless it was deliberately planned that way. And with the museum bombing, they set a time limit, which could also be for the same reason—to ensure that the visitors and staff could evacuate safely."

So, the only target was the exhibits.

If '9010' thought of avoiding casualties as a sort of twisted aesthetic, then they needed to be taught that such narcissism wouldn’t earn them any leniency.

Burning hundreds of cars to ashes and planning to do the same to art pieces was a crime as unforgivable as murder—well, he didn't know much about art, but the total damage if they succeeded would probably be incomparable to that parking garage.

"In any case, if there are no casualties, then there are also no witnesses."

Officer Yura sighed as he watched the forensic team begin their investigation—there was no way they'd find fingerprints or footprints in a scene this charred, but they had to find some evidence that would identify the culprit, or else there would be a second bombing.

Or worse, a third, a fourth—

"…Officer Yura. It's true there don't seem to be any witnesses—but we might be able to see something now."

With that, Officer Haraki said something cryptic and pointed to a corner of the ceiling, which was just as charred as the floor and walls—when Yura turned to look, he saw a security camera hanging there. Or rather, the remains of what used to be a security camera.

4

Even if the security camera had captured everything, the fire that followed the explosion must have burned the control room to a crisp, so Officer Yura didn't expect much—the tapes were probably ruined as well. But it seemed this was just the worry of an old-school detective; apparently, security cameras these days don't store footage on outdated things like tapes.

On the contrary, the recorded footage is transmitted wirelessly and encrypted to some far-off overseas server. The parking garage's security guards would log in with an ID and password on a computer to access the footage and monitor the premises—it seemed like an incredibly roundabout way to keep an eye on the building they were stationed in, but thanks to that, Officer Yura was able to contact the security company, get an emergency ID and password, and watch the footage at the time of the crime on Officer Haraki's 12.9-inch tablet.

It was hard to truly appreciate how convenient the times had become—because on the flip side, if '9010' had somehow obtained that ID and password, they could have constantly monitored the parking garage remotely from anywhere in the world.

If the assumption that '9010' deliberately chose a time when no one was around to set off the explosion was correct, then the likelihood of that scenario wasn't low.

If they had gone to the trouble of luring the guards away with a fake call but didn't bother with the security camera data, then the idea that '9010' was absorbed in the notion of a 'no-casualty

crime' might not be entirely off the mark—while investigative techniques had rapidly advanced thanks to digital technology, so too had criminal methods.

In any case, by watching the footage from the security camera at the time of the explosion, together with the tablet's owner, they were able to determine some things—and not others. What they determined was that the bomb detection expert, Assistant Officer Tobirai, had been spot on.

The footage was in black and white, but it clearly captured the van in its better days (as in, that morning)—moments before it exploded from within without warning, causing the flames to spread to the surrounding cars. A second later, the camera itself must have been blown away, as the footage abruptly cut to black.

When they replayed the explosion in slow motion, it seemed that the bomb had been placed in the cargo area, not under the hood.

It was ironic that they had to rely on modern technology, going through an overseas server, to confirm what Assistant Officer Tobirai had identified in less than an hour at the scene despite being blind. But if that was what they had determined, what they still didn't know was the identity of '9010'—they had hoped that rewinding the footage (though, come to think of it, 'rewinding' is a term left over from the days of old tapes) would reveal '9010' planting the bomb in the van. However, the security camera hadn't captured that crucial moment.

At the very least, they couldn't find it.

Even when they fast-forwarded (was "fast-forward" still a current term?) the footage from the time the van was parked until the explosion, there was no sign of anyone suspicious approaching to tamper with the cargo area—had they missed something? Should they watch it again at normal speed? But with the clock ticking down, they didn't have the luxury of spending two hours staring at footage of a stationary car.

"Could it be that '9010' wasn't being careless, but has actually tampered with the security camera itself?"

"Like sending a fake feed to the server or hacking the server to edit the footage? I'm not sure. That would require extremely high IT skills… and considering the low quality of the posted warning video, I doubt '9010' has 'extremely high' editing skills—"

In this area, it's probably best to trust the judgment of the younger generation. Officer Yura had only said that because he didn't know any better.

But even though Officer Haraki had dismissed the idea, he couldn't completely rule it out, saying, "If that's the case, we'll have to watch it in real-time to look for signs of tampering"—a tiresome suggestion.

The clock had somehow already passed noon. That meant less than eight hours remained—should they spend a quarter of that time performing the tedious task of watching what was effectively a still image? But the fact was that they had no other leads. Damn it, was '9010' invisible or something? Or a magician capable of planting a bomb in the blink of an eye, too fast for even a camera to catch?

"…What about the museum? Any news yet about finding the time bomb that was planted?"

"Nothing yet… Assistant Officer Tobirai should be arriving at the scene about now, I think."

There was no way things would be that convenient.

They had no choice but to give it their all here.

"For now, let's fast-forward through it again. From the moment the van was parked until it was blown to pieces—but this time, slow it down a bit."

"Understood. Last time was at 8x speed, so I'll play it back at 4x speed this time."

Even so, it would still take thirty minutes. In this situation, wasting time like this felt almost like cutting off a limb—but he couldn't just dump this tedious task on the younger officer. As ridiculous as it was, he had to keep his eyes glued to the tablet, trying his best not to blink, hoping something would pop out of the screen, like one of those stereoscopic pictures—

"Stop!"

Almost immediately after the playback started, Officer Yura shouted at Officer Haraki to stop—his partner was startled by the sudden outburst, and Officer Yura asked,

"Can you get in touch with the owner of the van?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Of course—we're in the process of contacting all the owners of the cars that were destroyed, not just this one. There are that many victims, after all, with so many cars burned to a crisp, but it seems that despite the video being publicly available, there are still quite a few people who don't know about the incident yet, so finding the owners has been difficult in some cases… but since it's a contracted parking lot, most of the owners should be easy to find…"

"Prioritize finding the owner of the van. I want to speak with them."

"…Are you thinking that the van's driver might be able to spot something in this footage that could lead us to '9010'?"

"No."

With that, Officer Yura turned his gaze back to the footage displayed on the tablet—the moment just before the driver stepped out of the parked van, frozen on the screen. Even with the grainy quality of the security camera, it was clearly a tall and slouched man, almost as if trying to appear inconspicuous, but his every movement screamed, 'Look at me! I'm suspicious!'

"The driver is '9010.'"

5

"Please, let me call a detective!"

The scene shifted to an interrogation room at the police station.

As soon as the large man, Yakusuke Kakushidate, who had been brought in for questioning, realized that he was being questioned not as a victim whose car had been burned, but as the suspected bomber, he shouted this. It was a desperate cry, but one that seemed oddly familiar to him—he was a young man who, despite being visibly nervous, seemed strangely accustomed to the situation.

(A detective?)

Not a lawyer?

To be honest, when Officer Yura first looked into the profile of Yakusuke Kakushidate, an employee of the delivery company and owner of the van, he was certain we had their man—his record was a mountain of arrests. A mountain indeed, as tall as Mount Fuji or Everest, with a whole range of charges.

You could say he had been arrested for just about every crime imaginable—though he looked younger than his years, he was twenty-five, yet his arrest count far surpassed his age. Including minor offenses, his arrest count easily exceeded triple digits—the compiled data was thick enough to reach A4 size. There was no way to go through it all.

The officer couldn’t understand why someone like this was still walking free, but after skimming through the documents, he found that despite the high number of arrests, Kakushidate had never been indicted—not once.

Who was this guy? The president's son?

If not, he must have a ridiculously skilled lawyer on retainer. Determined to finally hold the young Kakushidate accountable, officer Yura entered the interrogation room with unwavering resolve. But instead of demanding a lawyer—the suspect requested a detective.

(Now that I think about it, in the warning video, '9010' said, 'Someone stop me,' as if daring us—'whether it's the police or a detective.')

But a right was a right, and he couldn't ignore it.

Besides, they hadn't even obtained a warrant for this case yet—there was no physical evidence, and the man was still just a person of interest. Even if this was just a stalling tactic, the officer couldn't deny him the right to make a call—not that they had time to waste, with the clock ticking down.

He brusquely told him, "Go ahead," and the young Kakushidate quickly pulled out his cell phone and opened his contacts—then, as if he suddenly remembered something, he asked,

"Um, this is the kind of case that needs to be solved today, right?"

What a brazen question, the policeman thought, suppressing the urge to yell at the man. "Yes. To be precise, by 8 PM today," he replied. How the other took that, he didn't know, but Kakushidate muttered to himself, "Then it has to be Ms. Kyoko… the fastest detective there is," and resumed fiddling with his phone.

(Ms. Kyoko?)

The fastest detective?

Whatever—it didn't matter. What mattered was trying to get this suspect to crack before this so-called detective arrived. He ordered Officer Haraki to gather information on this 'fastest detective' apparently called 'Kyoko,' and just as Kakushidate finished his call and took a breath, Officer Yura said,

"It would be in your best interest to confess sooner rather than later, Kakushidate—or should I say, '9010.'"

He would appeal to the suspect's emotions—something a machine could never do.

"Huh…?"

The young Kakushidate responded, looking confused—what an actor, the policeman thought, half-contemptuous. But he had to be the better actor here, despite his barely contained anger.

"Sure, the security camera didn't catch you, but by trying to use a trick, you've basically admitted that you're '9010'—don't you see that?"

Even as he questioned the young Kakushidate, the man remained silent, possibly exercising his right to remain so. Or maybe, even after all this, he still hadn't realized his mistake. It was such a blatant blunder to play dumb about.

"There were no suspicious individuals near the van from the moment it was parked to the detonation of the bomb in the cargo area… but the simple solution was right there. There was no need to plant the bomb at the crime scene, in a place where you'd have a security camera watching you—you could've done it at home in your own garage."

He could have simply loaded the bomb beforehand.

That way, the security camera wouldn't capture anything—but conversely, the only person who could do that would be the driver who brought the van.

The person who parked in that space.

The person who got out of the van and left the parking garage—a tall, hunched man. In other words, the young man sitting in front of him now—Yakusuke Kakushidate, an employee of the delivery company.

"Do you really think you can get away with claiming you didn't notice the bomb in the cargo area?"

"No, I'm telling you, there really was no bomb—there was nothing in the cargo area. It was empty."

Kakushidate explained, gesturing wildly.

What an obvious lie. It was almost pitiable.

After a lifetime of having his record wiped clean thanks to the invisible hand protecting him, he had forgotten not just the guilt of his crimes, but the fact that he committed them at all—he had come to truly believe he didn't do it. He refused to see the inconvenient truth. He had no concept of admitting fault. Even if they got a warrant, it might be difficult to get him to confess the location of the bomb before the deadline.

This pitiful man had already forgotten the crime itself, so he had probably forgotten where he planted it too.

"No, you see, I'm the wrongfully accused type, not the forgetful type."

"Forgetful type?"

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was he trying to confuse the investigation with nonsense? Not a chance—if he claimed he had forgotten his crime, then the policeman would make him remember by any means necessary.

Even if it meant using force—

"Um, Officer Yura."

Just as he was about to cross the line in my frustration, Officer Haraki returned to the interrogation room and intervened—had some information popped up on this aforementioned 'fastest detective'?

No, it wasn't that.

The 'information' hadn't popped up—'she' had.

"Kyoko Okitegami, the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, is here at the front desk."

"Huh?"

He let out a weird sound.

It hadn't even been five minutes since the phone call?

"She's the fastest detective, after all."

The young Kakushidate said, proudly, despite his continued suspicious behavior.

6

When 'QRETA 9010' heard from a friend at the police station that Yakusuke Kakushidate had called Kyoko Okitegami, they breathed a sigh of relief—in fact, this was the riskiest part of the plan.

It was the most precarious point.

Kakushidate might have hired a detective other than Kyoko Okitegami, or the investigators might not have treated him as a suspect in the first place—maybe they wouldn't have noticed anything, even after watching the security camera footage, or maybe they wouldn't have realized that the footage was stored on the server before the deadline. The possibilities were endless, and there was no way to cover all of them.

Of course, they hadn't taken the gamble blindly.

When choosing which vehicle to plant the bomb in, Kakushidate's van was selected because no one could match his reputation as the False Accusations Master, someone who was always suspected. And, they knew he was a regular client of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

Given that there was a time limit, Yakusuke Kakushidate, who had collected the contact information of various famous detectives as a precautionary measure, had likely chosen the 'fastest detective' to clear his name this time—but 'QRETA 9010' was not one to grade themself generously.

If anything, they were a tough critic.

They had only given themself a fifty-fifty chance.

People's actions, and even more so their feelings, cannot be fully controlled—unlike a bomb.

Even if everything went according to plan, if the Okitegami Detective Agency, where reservations could not be made in advance due to its unique nature, had taken on another case today, just that would have ruined everything—but for now, they were relieved.

Now they could focus entirely on the bombing of the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art.

As per the blueprint.

They could leave the multi-story parking lot to its fate. Whatever happened, happened—whether it became a wasteland or a volcano, it no longer mattered. More importantly, they had to skillfully toy with the bomb squad that would soon be rushing to the museum.

With this newfound confidence after passing the critical point, 'QRETA 9010' smirked—like a curator who had finally brought to life a project they had nurtured for years.

7

The person who appeared was a woman with entirely white hair, yet much younger than expected. She had an air of elegance, wearing glasses and a calm demeanor. Her outfit—a basic trench coat, a striped shirt, wide-legged pants, and heeled shoes—was so fashionable it seemed out of place in the interrogation room.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, a detective."

Nice to meet you?

What a strange thing to say—not just to Officer Yura, but especially to her client, the young Kakushidate.

Did this suspect call upon a detective he had never even met before in this desperate situation? Wasn't he supposed to have sought help from a detective who had previously gotten all his charges dismissed, a long-time acquaintance capable of delivering acquittals on par with the best defense attorneys? These doubts were resolved when Officer Yura read the handwritten note that Officer Haraki discreetly handed him—she was a 'forgetful detective.'

It seemed Officer Haraki had done his homework on the 'fastest detective'; he had managed to find out that Kyoko Okitegami was a detective who forgets everything. A detective whose memory resets every day, who strictly adheres to client confidentiality—and who solves every case within a day, the fastest detective.

Her catchphrase was written on the note—so she forgets not only the details of the case but even her clients. A strange detective, indeed, but she seemed to be highly competent… not only had she gotten Kakushidate's numerous charges dismissed, but she had also cooperated with the police in several investigations before (though she herself had forgotten this). At the end of the note, Officer Haraki had added a cautionary message: "The Chief has instructed us to be especially polite to Ms. Kyoko."

'So, she's "Ms. Kyoko," huh.'

It seemed this was an open secret among higher-ups in law enforcement, even if those like Officer Yura, who worked on the ground, hadn't been informed.

He had considered asking her to leave politely, but it seemed that wasn't going to be an option—meanwhile, the young Kakushidate was beaming, as if she were a beacon of hope in his dire situation, upon seeing Detective Kyoko arrive.

"Thank you for coming, Ms. Okitegami! Please, you have to clear my name!"

"Yes. I'll do everything I can, Mr. Kakushidate. Of course, that's if you're innocent."

The detective smiled, but her tone was curt. It seemed she treated every encounter as their first, no matter how many times they had met.

"Now then. Officer Yura, could you please show me the footage from the security cameras? I've familiarized myself with the case as much as possible on my way here, but we can't proceed without seeing that footage."

Without wasting time on pleasantries, the fastest detective got right to the point—there was no point in resisting. In fact, presenting her with the irrefutable evidence might even sway her to their side.

At the very least, if she were a lawyer, there would be enough material to convince her to persuade her client to 'plead guilty.' If the bombing of the museum ended in failure, Kakushidate might avoid a life sentence—he might even live long enough to get out of prison, though he might not be there when his grandparents pass away, he could still make it in time for his parents.

Officer Yura instructed Officer Haraki, who then played the security camera footage on his tablet—it was a fifteen-minute clip, even at eight times the speed. But even during the fast-forwarding, the detective Kyoko didn't remain silent. She continued asking a series of questions to Kakushidate, Officer Yura, and Officer Haraki in turn, trying to get a comprehensive grasp of the case. Although it was none of his business, the policeman thought she should focus more on the screen—did she have three brains? Judging by Kakushidate's reaction, this multitasking approach seemed to be the fastest detective's usual style.

"Hmm, I see, I see."

Fifteen minutes later, as the footage cut to black, Detective Kyoko nodded with great interest.

Officer Yura braced himself, thinking she might have discovered something new that he had missed, but her comment was, "Wow, modern technology is amazing." It turned out she was simply amazed that security camera footage could be transmitted as a signal through the air, allowing it to be viewed from the interrogation room, far from the scene—so she was technologically challenged, like him?

He felt a slight sense of kinship, but it was short-lived.

"Touchscreens have come this far, huh?"

Detective Kyoko continued with a delighted tone—did she not know about touchscreens? That was way too analog—even more so than Officer Yura—no, it wasn't that she didn't know; she had forgotten. For this forgetful detective, whose memory resets every day, 'modern technology' never gets updated… so it was possible she was approaching this case with even more outdated knowledge than Officer Yura.

Seemingly unbothered, she switched gears with a casual "Anyway."

"Indeed, it seems that no one other than Mr. Kakushidate, the driver, approached the van—so it seems reasonable to deduce that the bomb was planted outside the multi-story parking lot."

"N-No way! Please wait, Ms. Kyoko!"

Kakushidate stood up in a panic to protest—he was so tall that when he stood, it looked as if he wasn't standing on the floor but hanging from the ceiling. If he straightened his hunched back, he'd probably be around two meters tall.

"You must have missed something because you watched it in fast-forward! Let’s watch it again, this time in slow motion! Or even frame by frame!"

Don’t be ridiculous.

That would take them far past the 8 PM deadline… could this be a stalling tactic? Was he just pretending to be flustered while pulling such a petty trick…? Yet, the forgetful detective didn’t take the bait of such a foolish suggestion.

"I’m the fastest detective. I wouldn’t miss anything in footage played at just eight times the speed—so now, please show me a different video. Can I see the warning video from the culprit that you mentioned?"

"Oh, yes."

Officer Haraki operated the tablet as instructed, launching an app to pull up the relevant video on the sharing site—Detective Kyoko watched the process as if she were witnessing magic. The warning video titled 'Demonstration,' posted by the user 'curator-9010,' had briefly jumped to the number one spot in views, but now, half a day later, it had settled down to third place—incidentally, the first place was 'Puppies Singing in Harmony to Music,' and second place was 'Hamster Being Piggybacked by a Cat.'

The speed at which things change on the internet is far beyond 'eight times speed'—but then again, it’s not like the National Diet Building or Tokyo Skytree was targeted. With a nondescript multi-story parking lot and a local art museum as targets, this was to be expected. Officer Yura hoped that the warning video posted by 'QRETA 9010' would fade into obscurity just like that.

It was a rather ironic hope, considering he was standing in front of the suspect believed to be the uploader and the forgetful detective the man had called. Still, ignoring the capable detective, Detective Kyoko innocently asked, 'Can I try pressing the play button?'"

"This responds to the static electricity from your fingers, right? *Giggle*, I bet it could be useful for secretly taking fingerprints too."

…Maybe she wasn't so innocent after all.

Showing a glimpse of her detective side, Detective Kyoko watched this particular video at normal speed and in silence—unlike the security camera footage, it had sound, so it was only natural. The voice was modified, and there were subtitles, but… the policeman noticed that even the young Kakushidate was peering into the tablet the same way.

(He’s acting like it’s his first time seeing a video he made himself.)

He seemed so suspiciously awkward, yet maybe he was a better actor than the officer thought—he did say he was prone to false accusations, not memory loss.

As for the forgetful detective, after watching the less-than-a-minute-long video, she commented, "Well, there might be ways to operate it without leaving fingerprints," with a completely off-the-mark observation. Enough with the touchscreen commentary. Was she talking about gloves that let you operate a smartphone while wearing them? Gloves had been around for ages, but he bet the inventor never imagined they'd evolve in such a strange way.

"Uh, um… Ms. Kyoko?"

Kakushidate, now visibly anxious, spoke up, as the detective seemed more interested in technology than her client… in response,

"'QRETA 9010,' huh? This video is quite theatrical," she said.

Exactly, exactly. Now, please convince the person who made this theatrical video to stop resisting and confess, Officer Yura thought, glancing at the clock and growing more hopeful ('we've wasted almost thirty minutes on this!'). But to his surprise, the forgetful detective continued,

"The real question now is, why is this person trying to falsely accuse my client… I just don't understand that."

8

"F-Falsely accuse?"

She said she didn't understand, but by saying that, the forgetful detective was implying it was obvious that '9010' was trying to pin the blame on Kakushidate. Could she be planning to outright deny the charges? Was she going to claim that Kakushidate had been framed by some convoluted conspiracy logic? Was she really going to use such courtroom tactics in this time-sensitive interrogation room—was this stylish woman really a detective? Not a sharp-tongued, or rather, crooked lawyer?

"Oh no, I'm definitely a detective. The fastest and a forgetful one at that. I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

Now that's way too fast.

Officer Yura could no longer hide his frustration—no matter how much the Chief ordered him to be patient, there was a limit to his patience. This wasn't a game. Even as they spoke, there could be a ticking time bomb at the museum, counting down the seconds—there was no time to waste on such shallow tactics.

"It’s not a game, it’s deduction, Officer Yura. Besides, wasn’t it you who first brought deduction into this? The elimination method—deciding that the driver of the van is the bomber because there’s no footage of anyone else approaching—isn’t that more of a detective’s approach than a police one?"

She hit a sore spot.

Indeed, there was no physical evidence—so they hadn’t obtained an arrest warrant yet. Even if there were physical evidence, it likely got incinerated in that explosion… in that sense, Detective Kyoko was right; Officer Yura might be jumping the gun by grilling Kakushidate in the interrogation room.

There were a few procedural violations too. But so what?

Since they couldn’t think of any other suspects, and time was of the essence, they had no choice but to act based on logic rather than law, even if some details got a little rough.

"Since you can't think of any other suspect—then, if I can present another suspect, you’ll release my client, is that correct?"

"...Well, yes."

It was a bit of a trick question, but the policeman couldn’t very well say 'No, we won’t release him, we’ll keep him locked up until he confesses'. Still, if she could argue that there was another suspect based on that footage, he’d love to hear it.

"Then, let me explain. Without beating around the bush, and with the utmost speed—this is all about perspective."

"Perspective?"

Kakushidate repeated the detective’s words, still looking uneasy.

"Yes. In detective novels, the master detective often stresses the importance of having an objective view, not a subjective one—seeing the whole picture from a bird’s-eye view. However, in this case, because that perspective came from the extremely objective device of a security camera, positioned in the highly panoramic location of the ceiling, Officer Yura, you inadvertently overlooked the truth—excuse me, not 'the truth,' but 'another possibility.'"

No need to be polite.

If there was something he had missed, he’d like to hear it.

"After Mr. Kakushidate parked in that space, no one approached the van to plant a bomb—so you concluded that Mr. Kakushidate, the driver, must be '9010,' and had planted the bomb beforehand. Forgive me for being repetitive, but Officer Yura, is that your deduction?"

"Yes. If you'd like, you can watch the footage again."

Impatiently, he answered in a dismissive tone—it wasn't repetitive, it felt more like she was using a slow-walking tactic instead of being the fastest.

"But no matter how slowly you watch it, there's no shadow approaching the van at the epicenter of the explosion from any direction—front, back, left, or right."

"What about from below?"

"Huh?"

"You said there was no shadow approaching from any direction—but can you confidently say that no shadow approached from directly beneath the vehicle?"

At that suggestion, Officer Yura hurriedly took the tablet from Officer Haraki and operated it himself—playing the security camera footage at eight times speed.

It was footage he had already seen multiple times.

The fixed overhead camera kept the van in frame the entire time—filming from a diagonal, elevated angle.

(Directly below—it's a blind spot. That's true.)

Because it was a bird's-eye view that covered the entire area, if someone had been hiding there, it would have been impossible to capture them within the frame—did they crawl under the vehicle, like they were doing maintenance, drill a hole in the floor of the van, and load the bomb into the cargo area? After all, if it blew up in the explosion, who would know if there had been a hole there beforehand?

No, no, no, but still, the idea of someone 'approaching from below' wasn't worth considering.

For a moment, he was taken aback by the thought, but the crime scene wasn't on a public road. It wasn't even on the first floor; it was on the second floor of a multi-story parking lot.

There's no way the van was conveniently parked directly above a manhole, allowing someone to approach from below—the only thing underneath was concrete. And that was something Officer Yura had confirmed with his own subjective, if not objective, eyes during the scene investigation—it was charred concrete under the melted scrap metal.

"Weren’t there more than just one piece of scrap metal? There were a few other cars melted on both sides as well, weren’t there?"

Melted—indeed they were.

Even just in the central area, two cars on the right, three on the left. In fact, the entire multi-story parking lot was almost full at that time. The only blind spot wasn’t directly under the van where the bomb was placed—the spots under the cars parked on either side, and even further to the left and right, were also blind spots.

In other words…

"…Are you saying '9010' avoided the cameras by crawling under the cars parked on the floor, making their way to the van?"

"Excellent deduction, Officer Yura."

The white-haired detective said in a tone that was almost mocking.

9

They immediately obtained a map of the multi-story parking lot and contacted the security company to get the exact locations of the cameras—this was to verify how realistic Detective Kyoko’s deduction was.

Was it just a theory, or something more?

Officer Yura also had the investigators still on-site send over color photos of the surrounding area in question—this allowed them to clearly identify which spaces were occupied by which vehicles. Depending on the type of vehicle, it might not be possible for a person to crawl underneath—even if most of the cars in the crime scene photos were little more than wreckage, it was enough for a car enthusiast like him to identify them. He might not know the exact year, but he could tell the make and model.

While Kyoko Okitegami, who had claimed rough deductions as her specialty, seemed to understand that detailed verification wasn’t her job, she spent the time just carefully examining the map of the multi-story parking lot that had been brought in—she didn’t even try to reassure her client, who looked as nervous as if he were awaiting a verdict on his fate.

In that sense, she definitely wasn't a defense attorney. If the young Kakushidate was truly the only possible suspect, she would have pointed it out mercilessly—and in record time.

After nearly half an hour of investigation, what was the result?

The conclusion reached was, surprisingly, "perfectly possible"—by using the underside of the cars as a tunnel route, someone could indeed avoid the surveillance of the security cameras. Not only could they evade the problematic camera, but they could also move through the blind spots of all the ceiling cameras.

Of course, it was still a parking lot, so the cars weren't parked too closely together—there was space between each car, and the person would have to crawl out of the shadows when moving between them. However, those spaces are also blind spots from the vantage point of a ceiling camera—a wide-angle view creates its own blind spots.

Additionally, even when moving from one parking area to another, the security cameras didn't cover all the lanes within the parking lot.

While the movement would be far from smooth, more like a winding, slithering path—likely getting their clothes filthy—Officer Yura had to admit that this was indeed a viable "alternative possibility."

"Oh, so that's why the ski wear in the preview video was so dirty," Officer Haraki remarked, in a way that made it unclear whose side he was on, though he was probably right. The gloves and ski cap might not have been there just to enhance anonymity, but also to protect the person's skin.

And so, the investigation was back to square one.

Despite the discovery of new information, they hadn't made any progress—in fact, it felt like they had just wasted precious time.

"If we're talking about wasted effort—I'd say the kind of trick '9010' might have pulled off is even more of a waste. Why go to such lengths to frame Mr. Kakushidate?"

This time, it was Detective Kyoko who said something that made it hard to tell whose side she was on.

The young Kakushidate, who had been starting to feel a bit relieved, now looked shocked and asked, "W-What do you mean?"

"Well, as a forgetful detective who doesn't keep records, I can understand wanting to avoid the security cameras while setting up the bomb. But if the goal was simply to hide their identity, they could have just worn that ski wear and boldly planted the bomb—if they had lured the guards away with a fake phone call, the explosion wouldn't have been stopped. So, the fact that they took such a risky approach suggests that their real objective was to frame Mr. Kakushidate, the driver of the van, for the crime."

So that’s what she meant earlier when she said, "I don’t understand."

Now that she mentioned it, it really was risky.

Even if they managed to avoid the security cameras, it was still a fragile trick that could easily be exposed by the slightest mishap—if a guard was lured away, but for some reason, or no reason at all, one of the drivers happened to return, they would have seen someone crawling under the cars, and it wouldn’t just be suspicious—it’d be outright alarming. And if the driver didn’t notice and tried to drive off while the person was still under the car, they could get crushed.

Moreover, fundamentally, trying to plant a bomb by breaking through the floor of the van from underneath doesn’t seem as easy as it sounds—it was sabotage, after all. They’d be carrying a highly sensitive bomb under their arm—one small mistake, and they could blow themselves up. Even if they succeeded in making a hole, that hole would literally be their grave.

While it’s not entirely meaningless, as Detective Kyoko pointed out, it would have been much safer to just put on the ski wear, boldly break the rear window, and plant the bomb. It’s hard to believe that someone who posted such a video would be too shy to appear on camera for even a second.

"So, '9010' is someone who holds a grudge against Mr. Kakushidate?" Officer Haraki voiced a reasonable assumption.

It was possible, considering that his van was blown to bits—but Detective Kyoko, who had raised doubts, didn’t seem to agree with that idea. "Or perhaps," she began, offering an alternative theory—but then she elegantly covered her mouth.

"It’s not my place to say. My work as the fastest detective ends here. Mr. Kakushidate, may I collect my fee?"

"Oh—yes, um..."

Flustered, Kakushidate pulled out his wallet from his pocket—it seemed that payment was in cash, likely due to the forgetful detective’s strict confidentiality policy. Despite the fact that less than an hour and a half had passed since he called the Forgetful Detective Agency, the fee he handed over was quite substantial.

It was no one else but Officer Yura who had nearly made a wrongful arrest, but the amount was enough to make him worry—he even thought that it might be better to slip some money to the young Kakushidate out of his own pocket.

"Uh, um—Ms. Kyoko. You say your work is done… but aren’t you interested in finding out who 'QRETA 9010' really is?"

After settling the payment, Kakushidate timidly asked this, but she responded coolly, "I'm very interested, but it's not my job."

"I still have the final task of laying out the money you paid me on the office floor and grinning at it."

"T-That's a cruel joke."

Kakushidate smiled awkwardly—it didn't sound like a joke at all. In any case, she bowed deeply to both of them,

"Well then, Officer Yura, Officer Haraki, good luck with your continued search for the bomber. I'm rooting for you—from the shadows, but not the shadows under the cars, okay?"

With those light-hearted, yet somewhat formal words of encouragement, she began to leave the interrogation room. Kakushidate, flustered, tried to follow her, saying, "W-Wait, Ms. Kyoko."

It seemed like he was hoping that, if possible, she would continue to investigate until she uncovered the true identity of 'QRETA 9010,' the one who not only committed the crime but also tried to frame him—but it looked like his hopes were dashed, and now he didn't know what to do.

(…Wait a minute?)

But that idea, "if possible," wasn't such a bad one, was it? Instead of giving some money to Kakushidate, it might be better to add it to that fee—

(The Forgetful Detective takes cases from the police too, right?)

The fastest detective.

There were about seven hours left until the deadline given in the threat—there was no time to hesitate. There was no time to deliberate, no room to worry about appearances—to move the investigation forward, the quickest way was to increase the number of dice rolls.

"Ms. Kyoko."

Officer Yura called out to her, still maintaining the bare minimum of his role as the grumpy veteran detective, and asked in a serious tone,

"Just for reference, how much is the overtime fee for your agency?"

"Oh my, how insulting. Do I really look like the kind of detective who would work for money?"

She stopped in her tracks, a broad smile on her face—-it seemed that, whether or not she would *work*, she was the kind of detective who would *stop* for money.

10

When 'QRETA 9010' heard from a friend at the police station that the Forgetful Detective, who had been about to leave, was just barely stopped by the detective in charge of the case, they felt more dread than relief.

Despite all the precautions taken, with multiple layers of misdirection to ensure the Forgetful Detective wouldn’t realize that the real target was her, whether it was intuition or because of some slip-up on their part, the white-haired detective had proven Kakushidate’s innocence and was about to quietly withdraw—what a mess.

The thought that all that careful planning, going so far as to crawl under cars like a snake, could have been for nothing was terrifying—and even more terrifying was the sharpness of the Forgetful Detective.

If she had misinterpreted it as a crime committed by someone holding a grudge against Kakushidate, that would have been ideal—but it seems she wasn’t fooled by such shallow misdirection. She probably figured that if they really intended to frame Kakushidate, they would have gone to much greater lengths to fake the evidence—though, that wouldn’t have been a problem either. However, if they had gone too far, there was a real risk that he might have actually been arrested, so it was a tricky balance to maintain.

'I thought I had aimed for the perfect balance, but unfortunately, it seems I was too lenient—indeed, from what I’ve heard, the Forgetful Detective is moving far faster than I had anticipated. Even if the trick was meant as a sort of tutorial, something to greet her with and let her expose, I can’t deny that I underestimated her. On that point, I must reflect seriously and consider some adjustments for the future.'

Things rarely go as planned.

They don’t follow the blueprints drawn up—this must be acknowledged.

That said, in the end, it was rather typical of her to succumb to the power of money. Still, it made them tighten up—it made them fully aware of the kind of detective they were planning to go up against.

Perhaps they had misjudged their opponent.

No, that wasn't it. They didn’t choose wrong.

She was the only detective worth challenging.

However, regardless, before Kyoko Okitegami arrived at the museum with the detective in charge, there should be a slight delay—dealing with her would come afterward. Right now, they needed to deal with another unexpected situation.

Another unexpected situation had popped up.

Despite allowing plenty of time before the explosion, the evacuation from the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art still wasn't complete.

While the visitors had been evacuated, some staff members were refusing to leave, stubbornly remaining inside as if staging a strike—they were apparently trying to take the exhibits outside to protect them from the explosion, but the bomb squad wouldn't allow it because of the risk that the bombs might be hidden in those very exhibits. There had been a bit of a scuffle between them.

What a pointless struggle.

It was almost laughable, but there was no time for that—if things continued like this, everyone would die. The bomb they prepared as 'QRETA 9010' had that kind of destructive power.

Minimal firepower, maximum effect.

That wasn't their intention—it didn't align with their purpose.

Incidentally (and they did mean incidentally), as 'QRETA 9010,' they couldn't say they didn't understand the feelings of the staff who were trying to protect the artwork, even if it meant going against the authorities or the bomber—if the culprit didn't, they wouldn't call themself a 'curator,' even in jest.

'We share the same love for art.

It's just that the art our hearts adore is different.

Now, I need to figure something out—I'm not planning to change the explosion time. Or rather, I can't change it. Like the Forgetful Detective's catchphrase, 'QRETA 9010' only has today—I've been preparing for this day.

Should I post another video to call them out?

No, the reason that preview video got any attention, even temporarily, was because of the footage of the parking garage explosion as a 'demonstration'—a video of a mysterious skier just talking isn't likely to catch the attention of the investigators in such a short time. Unfortunately,

without shocking footage, the username 'curator-9010' isn’t going to reclaim the top spot in views. The competition is fierce.

Besides, I’ve already disposed of that whole ski outfit. What month do you think it is? Plus, to be honest, I’m not good at editing and uploading videos—I don’t think I can do it within the time limit. Good grief, who would’ve thought I’d end up cornered by the very time limit I set for myself?'

It was all so absurd.

So, they'd switch gears and instead of calling out to everyone, they'd address a specific individual—they'd appeal to the leader of the artistic ideologues among the staff, and if they could convince that person to surrender, the rest would likely follow suit.

Because without even checking, the bomber could say with certainty that the leader of the resistance was none other than the museum director—that director.

Imagining the famous director squaring off against the bomb squad, it was a dire situation, yet 'QRETA 9010' couldn’t help but smirk—honestly, that too was a form of art. Living art. Though they couldn’t say they loved it.

Still, it would be troublesome if those people ended up dead.

11

Unlike me, the False Accusations Master, normal people might have an innocent dream of riding in a police car at least once in their life. Riding in that glaringly contrasted black-and-white vehicle is like a daily routine for me—it’s probably more often than I ride in my own car. If anything, with the added option of handcuffs, it feels like I’m riding in one at least once a day.

However, even for someone like me, riding on the back of a police motorcycle was a different matter—and especially when the person I’m desperately clinging to so I don’t get thrown off is the white-haired Forgetful Detective, this was something I had to admit was a first in my twenty-five years of a life filled with false accusations.

Although you can’t see the white hair because of the helmet, Ms. Kyoko in a full-body, tight-fitting rider’s suit looked incredibly cool—relatively speaking, I’d rather not think about how ridiculous and comical it must look for a large man like me to be clinging to her on the back seat for dear life.

Good grief.

This reckless drive, blasting down the highway at top speed (by the way, when I say 'top speed,' I’m not talking about the speed limit indicated by the road signs, but the top speed shown on the

police motorcycle’s speedometer), was the result of negotiations between Officer Yura, the on-site commander of this bombing case, and Kyoko Okitegami, the head of the Forgetful Detective Agency—to be blunt, they couldn't agree on what officer Yura called the 'overtime rate.'

Negotiations broke down.

Since it’s a business, even as a regular customer, I couldn’t butt in, but it seemed Ms. Kyoko wasn’t too keen on getting involved in this case—she clearly demanded a higher fee than usual from Officer Yura.

In the end, she said,

"Well, if you’re willing to lend me a police motorcycle as transportation to the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art, I’ll take the case."

She threw out this outrageous (literally law-defying) condition, probably expecting it to be rejected, but Officer Yura made the surprising decision to agree.

While it might have been a mistake what led to a frustrating false accusation for me, the way he made some detective novel-like deductions suggests that Officer Yura might be more flexible than his tough appearance suggests—maybe, as Ms. Kyoko pointed out, he’s more aligned with detectives than with typical police officers.

"Let’s make a deal. I’ll waive the traffic violation fines in exchange for the fee."

In a situation with a looming deadline, it could be said that he cut out the waste of time spent negotiating—and that’s how we ended up in this current speed race.

The desire to ride a police motorcycle rather than a police car is perhaps more sophisticated and niche, and while I'm grateful about seeing this new side of Ms. Kyoko, the real question is, why am I here? Why am I clinging to the Forgetful Detective like a koala, or a sloth?

I'm sure you're wondering.

I'd rather be back at work. My own job. After getting fired from the travel agency last time, I finally found a new job (in delivery services), but at this rate, I’m going to get fired again—but rather than saying I’m on a sinking ship,

"Mr. Kakushidate, you might as well come along. Your suspicion hasn’t been completely cleared yet."

Ms. Kyoko personally invited me, so I had no choice.

I didn’t particularly want to ride a police motorcycle, but I did want to enjoy a drive with Ms. Kyoko—if I had imagined that it would involve speeding down the highway on an exposed two-wheeler, I probably wouldn’t have agreed.

Well, it’s also true that the false accusation against me hasn’t been completely cleared yet—back in that interrogation room, Ms. Kyoko merely presented "another possibility," not the "truth."

In that sense, my request still hasn’t been fully resolved—especially if the culprit was indeed trying to frame me.

"I don’t think they were really trying to frame you," Ms. Kyoko said.

She spoke through the intercom inside the motorcycle helmet—there was no way to have a normal conversation with the wind rushing past us. No, even with the intercom, it shouldn’t be possible to have a normal conversation while riding a motorcycle at over 100 kilometers per hour, but Ms. Kyoko’s tone was as calm as if she were on a coffee break—a black coffee break, that is.

I would have preferred if she didn’t demonstrate her multitasking abilities while driving, but the topic was intriguing—'9010' didn’t try to frame me?

"Not seriously, no. While the suspicion was placed on you, it was set up so that it would be easily cleared—for example, the ski wear in the preview video being dirty. Don’t you think that was an obvious clue?"

Indeed.

If it had gotten dirty from crawling under cars or through concrete, it would have been easy enough to change clothes—hardly too much trouble for a perfect crime. It was a blatant hint.

"I figured out the trick when I saw the security camera footage, but after seeing the hint in the preview video, I got confused instead—it was too obvious. It was almost as if they wanted the mystery to be solved—more like bait than misdirection."

Bait.

If that’s the case, then I can’t help but feel sorry for my car, which was blown up for such a trivial reason (well, it was a company car, so even though it was registered in my name, it didn't feel like mine anyway), but then, what was '9010’s' true intention?

If I wasn't the target, then who was? Back then you said 'Or perhaps,' Ms. Kyoko, so do you have an idea who it might be?

"That’s the thing—just to confirm, Mr. Kakushidate, you’re a regular client of my office, right?"

"Y-Yes. You even call me 'Mr. Yakusuke' sometimes."

"I see, Mr. Kakushidate."

I had mustered up my courage and tried to step forward, but it was a swing and a miss—after all, in the Forgetful Detective Agency, where every client is treated as a first-timer, regulars aren’t treated as regulars. But if that’s the case, what was the point of that confirmation?

"This is just a hypothetical, but it’s possible that '9010,' by setting a time limit and deliberately using you as a scapegoat, was trying to bring me—the fastest detective—onto the stage."

"..."

That… well, I don’t know, it sounds a bit self-centered, or perhaps she’s overthinking it, but then again, overthinking is Ms. Kyoko’s job.

It’s exhaustive deduction.

Maybe that’s why she tried to leave before—because the job wasn’t fully completed yet—

"In fact, that’s also why I insisted on borrowing this motorcycle from Officer Yura. If '9010' anticipated my speed, I have to exceed that expectation."

I see.

Well, it’s possible she just wanted to use that as an excuse to ride the motorcycle, but I’ll let that slide—being the Forgetful Detective, and with her personal information being almost non-existent, Ms. Kyoko naturally doesn’t have a driver’s license (not even for a moped, let alone a large motorcycle), but I’ll let that slide too.

Incidentally, Officer Yura and Officer Haraki are of course heading to the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art in a patrol car—they left at the same time, but at this rate, we’ll arrive ten or twenty minutes earlier.

It might seem like a small difference, but ten or twenty minutes is a huge deal when the time limit is approaching, and for the fastest detective, Ms. Kyoko, those ten or twenty minutes could be enough time to solve ten or twenty mysteries.

It’s ten or twenty minutes that could turn the tables.

Maybe, if '9010' really does want the Forgetful Detective to appear, Ms. Kyoko might have brought me along as part of a strategy to break the usual routine.

For a renowned detective like Ms. Kyoko, who doesn't need an assistant, even this two-person motorcycle ride is already an irregularity. Arriving at the museum, where the bomb threat was made, faster than expected and with me in tow—perhaps that's how she plans to disrupt the scheme by '9010'. It felt as if the showdown between the detective and the culprit had already begun—now that I think about it, in the preview video, '9010' did say something provocative not only to the police but also to detectives.

"Someone, please stop me—"

"…It might actually be a genuine SOS."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"In mystery novels, a crime prediction letter is just a cute gimmick to spice up the story, but in the real world, the situation is usually more desperate. There could be circumstances or emotions where someone doesn't really want to commit a crime but feels compelled to do so—they can't stop themselves anymore, so they're asking someone to stop them. I think there's a psychological element to that."

You could call it a plea for someone else to act as their conscience.

I don't know—up until now, I always thought that statements from the perpetrator were just taunts to mess with the investigators, but when you put it that way, it certainly sounds desperate—a desperate SOS.

They were trying to prevent casualties, and they didn't really want to frame me—perhaps '9010' isn't just a heinous criminal after all.

They're a living human being.

"Well, that being said, I'm not planning to play the role of anyone's conscience—I'm not a detective who operates based on conscience or ethics. I'm satisfied as long as I can solve an intriguing mystery."

Such a statement, masking intellectual curiosity as a joke, would have been better said when she wasn't riding on a motorcycle in lieu of a hefty fee—it wasn't exactly her most fitting one-liner, but then again, perhaps conscience and ethics are also words that don't quite fit Ms. Kyoko.

So I wonder.

If '9010' is using various means, indirect yet direct, to involve the Forgetful Detective in this case, what could their true purpose be—if what they’re seeking isn’t just a substitute for their conscience?

"Who knows. Maybe '9010' was once a lover of mine," Ms. Kyoko said, this time not entirely joking—while speeding at 150 kilometers per hour.

12

The Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art.

Until I got tangled up in this case in such an unexpected way, I had never even heard of the museum (I don’t even know the proper definition of 'contemporary art'), but from what I’ve heard, it’s a rather unique museum for those in the know.

The exterior is so unconventional that you don’t even know where to enter, already making it stand out. After getting a bit lost, Ms. Kyoko and I finally found the entrance, flanked by two large stone statues of dogs, like the guardian lion-dogs at a shrine.

However, what caught my eye more than the two artificial dogs were the two real ones lying down beside the woman in sunglasses who was lazily sitting on the steps leading to the revolving doors—a Golden Retriever and a Doberman.

"Oh, what cute doggies," Ms. Kyoko said in a cheerful voice.

I always thought she was more of a cat person, but it seems she likes dogs too—though dividing people into factions may not be all that modern, Ms. Kyoko didn’t run over to pet the 'doggies.'

Aside from the Doberman, the Golden Retriever was clearly a guide dog—it was on duty.

However, the woman in sunglasses, who hadn’t approached but seemed to notice us standing still, looked up and said,

"Officer Yura."

Huh? Officer Yura?

While I was puzzled, the Doberman let out a low growl—prompting the woman in sunglasses to say,

"Oh, sorry, I was mistaken. I judged by the smell—who might you be? Are you colleagues of Officer Yura?"

She tilted her head as she slowly stood up.

It might be odd for someone who’s nearly two meters tall to say, but she was a slender, tall woman—with her high heels, she looked about thirty centimeters taller than Ms. Kyoko, who had changed into flat shoes for the motorcycle ride.

Unlike me, she wasn’t hunched over.

She stood straight, and gracefully so.

"Uh, um, I was… well, I was just about to be arrested by Officer Yura a little while ago—so maybe that’s why the smell got mixed up—"

No.

I’m giving unnecessary explanations. This is exactly my problem.

"I’m Yakusuke Kakushidate."

I introduced myself simply.

I also had a good idea why the Doberman, who was growling at me with intense wariness, was doing so—it was probably on duty. A police dog, a profession just as familiar to me as the back seat of a patrol car.

Which means, this person is with the police—?

Though her outfit—a pair of damaged jeans and a blue shirt—didn't exactly scream "public official." As I stood there, flustered, Ms. Kyoko smoothly held out a hand to calm me and introduced herself, "I’ve been assisting Officer Yura in the investigation. My name is Kyoko Okitegami, the detective."

"Oh, Kyoko Okitegami—the Forgetful Detective, right? I’ve heard quite a bit about you."

To my surprise, unlike Officer Yura, the woman in sunglasses knew about Ms. Kyoko—though it didn’t seem like she’d been informed beforehand. There was something almost suggestive in the way she said, "I’ve heard quite a bit."

Ms. Kyoko seemed a bit taken aback by this and replied with a slight squint, "If I'm the subject of rumors, I can hardly be called the Forgetful Detective, now can I?"

The woman smiled warmly at us—a smile that seemed friendly on the surface, but had an unfathomable depth to it. I might have just been imagining things, still nervous from having just been released, and now fearing I might be detained again.

"I’m Assistant Officer Azana Tobirai from the bomb squad. These little ones here are my partners, Extension and Manicure."

The bomb squad.

Of course, that makes sense. So, the Doberman—Manicure—was a police dog specialized in detecting explosives, a "police officer dog," so to speak. The dog looked capable and tough, even more so than me, who’s been fired from countless jobs. ...Though, calling it "tough" might be a bit of a stretch, given its somewhat well-fed appearance, which only added to its image of resilience.

But why would such an expert be lounging so blatantly at the entrance of the museum? An officer shouldn’t be relegated to doorman duty in a situation like this—I don’t mean to undermine the role of a lookout, but still. When I was riding the motorcycle here, I had been concerned about how we’d get close to a museum likely surrounded by onlookers, drawn by the preview video. But it turned out to be low tide in terms of crowds, with fewer people than expected.

At the time the preview video was released, there must have been a massive crowd, and as the 8 PM deadline approaches, they might flood back like a rising tide, but right now, at 3 PM, this awkward time of day, it seems even this spectacle has become dull.

So, it’s even less likely that they’d assign someone to doorman duty—not to mention, it’s odd that an officer from the bomb squad isn’t inside the building, especially since the bomb hasn’t been found yet. Even if Assistant Officer Tobirai is the kind of person who would volunteer to act as a doorman, it’s still strange.

"Well, you see, this museum," Assistant Officer Tobirai began, in a somewhat exasperated tone.

"Doesn’t allow pets."

That’s a ridiculous and infuriating stance, especially in an emergency like this—what are they thinking? I get that the museum has a duty to preserve the exhibits in perfect condition, so I can’t completely dismiss the policy, but lumping guide dogs and police dogs together with pets is unacceptable.

Moreover, according to Assistant Officer Tobirai, that wasn't the only reason she was stuck outside with her two canine companions—it seems the situation inside the museum was far more complicated than expected.

Preserving the exhibits.

There was a dispute between the museum staff, who wanted to move the exhibits outside before the bomb's set time, and the bomb squad, who didn't want anyone, not even the responsible staff, to touch anything inside until safety was ensured.

What a mess.

Fighting amongst themselves while the perpetrator was still out there.

Ms. Kyoko might have arrived the fastest, but I never expected that even the evacuation wasn't complete—when I got on the bike, I had hoped that by the time we arrived, the time bomb set by '9010' might have been found, but instead, the situation was in total disarray.

It seems 'QRETA 9010' isn't the only enemy here—before we can even track down their identity, we can't even start searching for the bomb.

The current time is just past 3 PM. Less than five hours remain.

Even for the fastest detective, that's not a lot of time, and to make matters worse, we can't fully trust that remaining time. After all, we're dealing with a bomb here. Even if '9010' didn't intend it, human error, a malfunction, or even a tiny unforeseen problem could cause an explosion at any moment.

"Unraveling the truth is one thing, but bomb disposal isn't exactly a detective's forte—having a professional act as a doorman is such a waste," said Ms. Kyoko, sounding exasperated as she grasped the situation.

"Alright. It seems there's no rule against detectives entering the museum, so if you let me inside, I'll persuade the staff to let the dogs in too. Working dogs deserve respect."

"That would be very helpful. Here, take this."

Without any unnecessary modesty, Assistant Officer Tobirai pulled something out of her back jeans pocket—a police ID.

Not something you'd normally toss around, and certainly not something you'd keep in your back pocket, but Assistant Officer Tobirai tossed it accurately towards Ms. Kyoko—seemingly locating her by voice and scent.

If she could do that, it seemed like she could just leave the dogs behind and go inside herself, but that wasn't her style—working dogs deserve respect.

Ms. Kyoko caught the pass.

"This design is different from the one I know. It's not really a 'notebook' anymore, is it?"

Ms. Kyoko made a playful remark—considering that the design of police IDs had changed from being 'notebooks' quite a while ago, this was probably one of her forgetful detective jokes. It didn’t seem to land, as Assistant Officer Tobirai responded coolly, "It’s your entry pass."

"If you show that to the leader of the bomb squad, you’ll have all-access to most areas inside the museum."

That makes sense, but still, it’s not something you should casually lend out—it’s not the same as a motorcycle, though even that’s different. But from her practiced gesture, it seems lending out her police ID is a routine thing for Assistant Officer Tobirai. She doesn’t see her ID as her proof of identity—her proof of identity is herself.

"Seems like you’re quite an unconventional officer."

"Same goes for you," replied Assistant Officer Tobirai with a shrug.

"Then, I’ll leave this as collateral."

With that, Ms. Kyoko placed her full-face helmet on the steps—it looked less like collateral and more like she was just leaving behind something she didn’t want to carry around after getting off the bike, but Assistant Officer Tobirai didn’t decline.

"I’ll take good care of it," she said, touching and feeling the shape of what she had been handed, then continued, "As a fellow oddball, let me give you some advice. While convincing the staff might get my two partners inside, that all-access pass won’t be of much use in there. After all, the museum director is quite a go-getter girl."

A go-getter girl?

What kind of description was that?

At first, I thought she was joking about being denied entry, but it seemed she was quite serious.

"Hmm, I’ll keep that in mind. By the way, what’s the director’s name?"

"If you look at the museum’s name, you’ll figure it out. It’s Ms. Shimure Machimura, Director of the Machimura City Museum. Apparently she takes the Japanese 'Shi' in her name to make the 'City' part of the museum. And with the rest of her name, I hear some call her Director Muré, perhaps drawing a parallel to Millet," answered Assistant Officer Tobirai smoothly.

Huh? It wasn’t a place name? It’s a person’s name?

Well, I mean, this place wasn't in Machimura City or anything, so I vaguely assumed it was an old place name...

"Maybe they wanted to give it a more prestigious name by making it sound like a public institution. Well, I suppose if it's named after the director, there's no legal issue."

As Assistant Officer Tobirai said this, she rolled up the hem of her shirt to show the handcuffs attached to her belt—though it seemed she wasn't carrying a gun, there were various other tools hanging from her belt, likely for bomb disposal.

Of course, if she couldn't get inside, those tools would be useless.

"I only had a brief exchange with her about my dogs, but Director Muré really is like a bomb herself. Handle with care. And of course, be careful of the real bomb as well. If you find it, do not touch it—whether you find it or not, actually, because we don't know where it is."

"Understood—see you later, Assistant Officer Tobirai."

"Yes, yes. I'll be eagerly awaiting your invitation, along with these little ones."

14

It was immediately obvious which person was the infamous Director Muré. Considering the size of the building, it shouldn't have been that large, but after passing through winding corridors that twisted and turned like a labyrinth, climbing and descending seemingly pointless stairs, we finally arrived at a hall. There, indeed, were two groups in the middle of a dispute, and among them stood a woman who stood out even more than the bomb squad with their intimidating presence.

Director Muré. Director Machimura, Shimure Machimura.

"How many times do I have to tell you? The works exhibited in this museum are all masterpieces of contemporary art—we cannot afford to lose even a single one. If you so much as touch them, we will immediately file a claim for damages. If you insist, then go get a warrant first!"

With her hair dyed a vibrant purple, matching her outfit from head to toe, and a scarf still wrapped around her neck despite being indoors, she could only be Director Machimura—she was holding her ground, not backing down an inch as she argued in a high-pitched voice with the bomb squad and the police who had arrived earlier.

And she was doing it almost entirely on her own—the other staff members seemed unsure of what to do, shrinking back behind her. It seemed the police team was just as bewildered… it's probably rare to encounter a "victim" who's so uncooperative in a bomb investigation.

Everyone was so on edge that they didn’t even notice when Ms. Kyoko and I entered the hall.

"Well, as I said, we’re in the process of getting a warrant… but we’re running out of time—"

The man trying to negotiate with Director Machimura was probably the leader of the bomb squad, but she cut him off, saying,

"Time? The works gathered here are eternal!"

They were completely talking past each other.

Or rather, she was using every opportunity to bite back.

"If there really is a bomb, we’ll find it ourselves! We can’t trust amateurs with this, so please leave!"

…It seems I misunderstood.

I had underestimated the gravity of the situation—grossly underestimated it. After hearing from Assistant Officer Tobirai, I had assumed it was a conflict between the investigation team trying to evacuate everyone from the building and the staff resisting that effort. But this is the exact opposite.

The staff is trying to drive the investigation team out.

They’re treating the professional bomb squad as amateurs—while it’s true they might be amateurs when it comes to contemporary art, it seems Director Machimura’s lack of respect isn’t limited to working animals.

A go-getter girl, huh? Yeah, she’s definitely enthusiastic.

However, it wouldn’t be fair not to acknowledge the depth of her passion for the artworks, a passion that even her own staff seemed to find overwhelming.

"So, what should we do, Ms. Kyoko?"

"It seems we’re being ignored, so let’s start our investigation without permission."

"We can’t just do that…"

"Of course not. And we did promise Assistant Officer Tobirai. In that case, Mr. Kakushidate, can I borrow that? I left mine as collateral."

Ms. Kyoko pointed at the full-face helmet I was holding under my arm—she had left hers outside as collateral (or rather, simply abandoned it) for borrowing the police ID, but I had been holding onto my own helmet all this time. It was a cumbersome burden, but what was she planning to do with it? Without understanding, I handed it over, and Ms. Kyoko slipped it over her white-haired head—wearing a full-face helmet indoors, without a motorcycle, and in a rider's suit certainly made her look suspicious, possibly even enough to get kicked out… or so I thought, but Ms. Kyoko swiftly took a "Workshop Announcement" pamphlet from a rack against the wall.

I couldn't imagine Ms. Kyoko being interested in a "15,000 Yen Origami Workshop for Adults," so I was puzzled by her actions, but without paying any attention to my confusion, she quickly folded the pamphlet—until she had made a triangular, helmet-like "origami" shape.

No, not a helmet—ah, I see what she's planning to do.

But before I could stop her, Ms. Kyoko raised the "origami" high into the air and,

"Bang!!!"

She brought it down as fast as she could—like a gunshot.

She had slammed down the "origami"—a "paper popper."

Even the two groups, who had been so heated in their argument that they were oblivious to the surrounding noise, couldn't help but turn around at this—they might have been passionately arguing, but they hadn't forgotten that this was an emergency.

And when they turned, they saw a full-face-helmeted rider—and a suspiciously behaving giant.

The bomb squad, the investigation team, the museum staff, and Director Muré all gasped, and it seemed like they had finally calmed down—at least, it looked that way.

It was as if the blood drained from their faces… No, I was just as terrified.

It was an extremely reckless interjection that could have gotten her shot on the spot (with a real gun) if things had gone differently, but with everyone's attention on her, Ms. Kyoko smoothly removed her helmet like in a commercial, flipped her white hair back with a flourish, and said,

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, the detective."

She then presented the police ID she had borrowed from Assistant Officer Tobirai—what a mismatched scene.

Unfortunately, even with Ms. Kyoko's negotiation skills, she wasn't able to get Extension, Manicure, or the young ace of the bomb squad, Assistant Officer Azana Tobirai, into the museum. Despite the back-and-forth with Director Muré, who had quickly regained her composure, and the bomb squad members supporting us (I learned during this that Ms. Tobirai was indeed considered an ace), Director Machimura remained stubborn.

It wasn't entirely unreasonable.

Apparently, the current special exhibition at the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art was themed around "taxidermy of animals"—with such artworks gathered from all over the country, she argued that it was impossible for dogs to behave themselves in their presence.

Who knew?

Well, even without that, contemporary art probably requires delicate handling, so it's understandable that she'd want to keep animals (including humans) as far away as possible—though there's no doubt her way of speaking to Assistant Officer Tobirai was problematic, it might have been my own prejudice against museum operations that led me to assume she was being "unreasonable."

"I understand. Let's retreat for now."

So, although Ms. Kyoko had borrowed the police ID, she wasn't able to fulfill her promise to Assistant Officer Tobirai. However, the Forgetful Detective never leaves empty-handed—she knows when to retreat without wasting time, and she's quick to switch gears. Without missing a beat, she said,

"Well then, both sides, please continue your session—or rather, your negotiations. Sorry to interrupt—oh, by the way, I completely understand that you don't want anyone touching the exhibited works, so would it be alright if I freely explore the non-exhibit areas?"

With that curious logic, she managed to strike a deal.

The non-exhibit areas, in other words, the "staff only" areas, should have been a much higher bar to clear, but Director Machimura, with a sigh and arms crossed, said as if she had made a great concession,

"Well, I suppose I can allow that much. Just this once, though."

She then returned to negotiating with the police team.

Since Ms. Kyoko was unofficially part of the investigation team, having been requested by Officer Yura, it might have been her most skillful move to separate herself (and me) from the

police team. And so, we ended up having the rare experience of exploring a museum while following a route that avoided the artworks.

It might not be under a car, but this could still be considered a blind spot. Just as the police were reluctant to let the staff remove any artworks from the museum, when you hear that a bomb has been planted in a museum, anyone would first suspect that it's hidden in one of the pieces—at the very least, they'd think it's in the exhibition area.

That's the museum's main stage, after all.

However, the culprit called themselves "QRETA 9010"—if we're going to adopt a curator's perspective, then the backstage is just as much a part of the museum's essence as the main stage.

To avoid wasting time waiting for the police team to somehow convince the director (assuming they could even pull it off), it was probably a good compromise to send a separate team, like us, to search the areas we were allowed to explore in the meantime.

It wasn't just about letting them feel like they "won."

"You know, that director seemed to actually like dogs," Ms. Kyoko said just as we passed the "No Entry Except Authorized Personnel" sign.

"Was it like a wallpaper or something? I caught a glimpse of her smartphone during the conversation—when she got an email, the screen had a picture of her with a dog wearing a collar."

"Really…"

She notices things well in that kind of situation. While observation is a basic skill for a detective, it's still surprising considering she didn't even understand touchscreens just a few hours ago. As for me, the only thing that stuck in my mind was her overwhelming all-purple outfit, and I couldn't process any other information. I can't even clearly remember what her face looked like now that we've left.

"Yes, that outfit was certainly a bit much. The clothes themselves were nice, but if it were me, I would have added some accent colors, even if the base was purple."

She was harsh. This detective who's strict about money is also strict about fashion.

"Is she an artist herself?"

"That doesn't seem to be the case. It looks like she's purely focused on curating contemporary art exhibitions—"

Apparently, as we left the hall, Ms. Kyoko had surreptitiously taken a "Museum Guide" from the pamphlet rack. She opened it to the "Message from the Director" page and handed it to me.

The photo there was as assertive as the profile, which was a long, abstract piece that didn't make much sense in the end. But it didn't describe her as an "artist" anywhere.

It only referred to her as a "curator"—though she's a director, it seems she has a strong connection to the field. You could say she's a top executive who can't stay away from the front lines…

"Based on what she said, I'd say she's more of a collector than a curator. That's probably why she can't bear the thought of everything being blown up by a bomb."

"But staying there like that isn't going to solve anything."

"That's exactly why they let a mobile unit like us get involved."

Even so, if Assistant Officer Tobirai hadn't lent us her police ID, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly. That's why I feel a bit guilty about not being able to fulfill the promise we made to her.

"Don't worry. Once Director Muré calms down a bit more, I'll politely ask her again—after all, as I mentioned earlier, bomb disposal isn't my specialty."

It wasn't a particularly hopeful outlook, but given that not only Assistant Officer Tobirai but the entire bomb squad were currently at a standstill, this wasn't the time to quibble over what's in or out of our area of expertise.

Though it's the backstage, this is still a museum, so the walls in the corridors were adorned with paintings and tapestries. If you let your guard down thinking it's just the back area, you might accidentally damage something and further inflame Director Machimura's anger.

Well, it's unlikely anyone would let their guard down while searching for a bomb…

"Don't get the wrong idea, Mr. Kakushidate. While finding the bomb is important, our primary goal is identifying the real culprit, '9010'—the one who, of all things, tried to pin the blame on you. We may not have time for turf wars, but we should at least fulfill our main duty first."

That's right.

That's where this all began. For me.

The goal is to clear my name from being falsely accused in the parking garage bombing—though it's not a good trait of mine, I had started to feel like protecting this museum was my mission, being swept up in the atmosphere.

But that wasn't it. Not at all.

I had simply sought help from the Okitegami Detective Agency out of a purely personal desire for self-preservation—the truth is, I'm someone who went to Paris and skipped the Louvre, a true philistine when it comes to art.

Maybe I was the one who shouldn't have been allowed inside the museum more than anyone.

Especially when it comes to contemporary art.

"Contemporary art, huh. To me, it's like something from the future—because for me, the present is long in the past."

While her comment about the police ID design was a forgetfulness joke, that sense of time is an inevitable part of being the Forgetful Detective—though it might be repetitive, it's true that there are no "modern people" left who are amazed by the evolution of touchscreens.

Despite her extraordinary learning ability, the future she learns today will be forgotten by tomorrow.

Even if there wasn't a time bomb, every day is a suspenseful race against time for Ms. Kyoko.

For her, there is only today.

"…Could it be that '9010' isn't targeting the artworks in the museum, but rather the director herself?"

While walking, I suddenly voiced a thought that crossed my mind about the "culprit's motive" we had discussed earlier through the intercom during the bike ride. Given her personality, her eccentricity, it wouldn't be surprising if she had made some enemies—is this just another prejudice-based assumption? At first, when I heard the museum was being targeted, I thought it must be someone bearing a grudge against one of the artists.

But now that we're here, it doesn't seem like this museum is dedicated to the works of a single artist. So maybe the culprit is trying to thoroughly destroy the director, who has such a strong collector's mentality—whether in a good or bad sense—to inflict psychological damage.

"Hmm. If the museum were to be blown up, it wouldn't just be psychological damage; the financial damage to the director would be enormous as well." Ms. Kyoko replied.

I didn’t expect her to take my opinion seriously.

"After all, many of the pieces are probably on loan."

"Right."

Instead of blowing up the parking garage out of the blue with no warning, this time, the culprit gave a warning in advance and even set a time limit—was it to torment Director Machimura…? Or maybe, did ‘9010’ anticipate that Director Machimura would stubbornly stay put and post the warning video for that very reason?

In other words, they might be aiming to cause not just psychological and financial damage, but fatal damage as well—

"I’m not so sure about that, Mr. Kakushidate. ‘9010’ seems to be trying to avoid causing casualties as much as possible—while the idea of a culprit holding a grudge against Director Machimura makes some sense, I don’t think ‘9010’ anticipated this situation. After all, at this rate, not just the director but also the investigation team and the staff could end up getting caught in the explosion."

True. Depending on how things unfold, we could get caught in it too.

"Rather, I think this chaotic situation might be something ‘9010’ didn’t plan for."

"Huh? What do you mean it wasn’t planned?"

"In the warning video, ‘9010’ explicitly encouraged evacuation—so maybe the time limit was set not to torment, but simply to allow a fair amount of time. It’s unclear why they’re so concerned about avoiding injuries even while planning a bombing—perhaps it’s what Officer Yura mentioned as their ‘aesthetic’—but maybe ‘9010’ is the one most frustrated by Director Machimura’s unique behavior."

Hmm.

What I thought was mere provocation might actually be a desperate SOS, and the profile of the culprit is proving to be more complex than I initially thought. But just as the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful detective is nothing more than a fantasy, the notion of a flawless, omnipotent criminal who can execute every detail of their plan perfectly is also an illusion—there is no mastermind laughing maniacally somewhere as they watch us being toyed with.

Rather, if we imagine ‘9010’ growing increasingly frustrated watching the investigation team and museum staff, who are all acting based on their own judgments and not moving as planned, the absurdity of the situation becomes even more apparent—though it’s hardly a laughing matter.

"However, Mr. Kakushidate, there's still room for the theory you suggested, that '9010's' target might be Director Machimura. As a detective team tasked with identifying the culprit, we should consider talking to her directly if time permits."

If time permits, huh.

I couldn't hide my frustration as I shook my head, feeling that time was the one thing we didn't have. Just then, something suddenly caught my eye, almost as if it had a spotlight trained on it.

It was ticking.

A mantel clock, counting down to 8:00 PM—its glass cover removed, and the dial marked with the number '9010' painted on in bold strokes, like an artist's signature in the corner of a painting.

16

After losing contact with their friend at the police station, 'QRETA 9010' judged that the stage had apparently shifted completely to the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art. Though the situation had taken an unexpected turn, they assessed that they were still handling it well enough.

The only thing that continued to trouble them was that the museum staff were still holding their ground—the bomber had made their move, but there was no response yet.

The situation was at a standstill.

They hoped that the Forgetful Detective would stir things up somehow—but if the infamous Kyoko Okitegami actually joined the bomb search, they couldn't afford to get too complacent. She might unexpectedly see through their true intentions—if she figured out why they planned to blow up the museum, she could trace that back to the identity of 'QRETA 9010'.

That would be undesirable.

Ideally, the criminal wanted her to mistakenly believe that the target wasn't the artwork, but Director Machimura's life—which is why they placed that 'mantel clock' in 'that room.'

17

It was the director's office.

Perhaps in an effort to maintain an open work environment, there were no doors in the various back rooms, making it look more like a trendy overseas startup. The rooms were only divided by partitions, allowing us to see inside from the hallway.

That’s how I happened to catch sight of the interior of the room marked ‘Director’s Office’ with a stylish purple plate—though I wish I hadn’t.

The mantel clock.

The mantel clock signed with ‘9010.’

Moreover, the clock was connected from its back to the laptop on the work desk with colorful wires—an obvious bomb. There was no attempt to conceal it. If I had seen this in the exhibition area, I would have thought it was the ambitious work of a rising artist. But this was the infamous director’s office. The intent behind it felt entirely different.

The room itself wasn’t as assertive as its occupant.

Though the plate was purple, the room’s design was more functional and businesslike—perhaps that eccentric fashion sense was a kind of performance as the museum director.

This wasn’t the time for such thoughts, but I couldn’t help retreating into them as a form of escapism.

I quickly glanced around, but the back area was deserted—everyone must have gathered in the hall. Damn… forget choosing a blind spot, but placing a bomb in the director’s office? How bold could ‘9010’ be?

Despite what Ms. Kyoko said, it seems that ‘9010’ really is targeting Director Muré’s life, doesn’t it? It’s hard to think otherwise. I need to hurry back and get someone from the bomb squad—but, oh, I’ll need the director’s permission to do that—though this isn’t really a situation where we need permission—if only I had insisted on bringing someone along—there should still be time before it explodes—

As these thoughts spiraled through my mind, keeping me frozen in place, Ms. Kyoko, without any prior notice this time, suddenly snatched the full-face helmet from me as if she were grabbing it from a thief.

She then put the helmet back on. As quickly as she had grabbed it, she put it on.

What the heck? Is she really trying to save herself alone in this sudden crisis? I always suspected she might be that kind of person! But it seems I was wrong. Instead, Ms. Kyoko shouted loudly,

"Hello! Can you hear me, Assistant Officer Tobirai!"

It's as if she was talking to herself—but she wasn’t, actually.

She was calling out to Assistant Officer Tobirai.

But calling out to Assistant Officer Tobirai from this deep inside the museum, when she's been barred from entering—oh, right, the helmet. The intercom in the helmet. Ms. Kyoko had left her helmet at the museum entrance as collateral when she borrowed the all-access police ID—she must have left the intercom on.

Of course, she did it on purpose.

Just in case something happened, keeping a line open to the bomb disposal expert was a risk management move that only Ms. Kyoko would think of.

I doubt she anticipated this kind of crisis, though—did she?

"I can hear you, over," came the response—the voice of Assistant Officer Tobirai, faintly audible from inside the helmet, likely adjusted for volume.

I doubt Assistant Officer Tobirai was standing by with her helmet on, waiting for the go-ahead to enter, but her response was quick. No wonder she's called an ace at such a young age—to be able to respond at Ms. Kyoko's speed.

"Is something wrong, Ms. Kyoko? Over."

"We found a bomb. Over," Ms. Kyoko reported directly, without any pleasantries.

Too directly.

"It's in the director's office in the back area. We're quite far from the hall where the bomb disposal team is gathered—it's just Mr. Kakushidate and me here. What should we do? Over."

"Normally, I'd tell you to stay calm first, but you don't seem to need that step, Detective," Assistant Officer Tobirai said, perhaps trying to lighten the mood.

"The current time is 3:50 PM. If the video warning is accurate, there should still be more than four hours before the explosion. Describe the bomb for me, over."

Ms. Kyoko quickly, but accurately and in detail, described the mantel clock on the work desk—not just the clock, but even the model number of the laptop it was connected to.

Assistant Officer Tobirai responded,

"The clock is a decoy. The wires connected to the laptop are just for show—they aren't actually connected to anything. It's a bluff to make it look like a bomb."

She then added,

"So, I'm retracting my previous statement. In that case, the clock's time can't be trusted. Even if the alarm is set for 8:00 PM, the bomb could go off at 7:00 PM. Or it could be in one minute. Or one second. Over."

It's unnerving to hear such a calm retraction.

I was impressed by the expert's ability to make such a definitive statement despite not being here in person, even though she's been barred from entering. But then again, if Ms. Kyoko could serve as her Extension and Manicure, Assistant Officer Tobirai didn't need to be here.

That was the fastest solution.

While Ms. Kyoko stayed composed, I realized I should try to calm down a bit.

"Mr. Kakushidate, please go get the bomb disposal team—can you retrace the path we took to get here?"

"W-Well, retracing our steps should be doable—"

Urged by Ms. Kyoko, I stammered but agreed—though it would take some courage to step back into the middle of that tense situation, I didn't have time to think about that.

"W-What about you, Ms. Kyoko? Are you staying here?"

I asked because it seemed wise to keep some distance from the room until the bomb squad arrived, even if we were going to keep watch, but—

"Yes, I'll stay right here."

Ms. Kyoko rolled up her sleeves.

She didn't have her usual calm smile.

"Following Assistant Officer Tobirai's instructions, I'll start disarming the bomb as quickly as possible—every second counts."

18

Although I had confidently declared that I could retrace our steps, I ended up getting lost—what an idiot.

It may sound like an excuse, but the back area was like a maze. Even the map in the pamphlet only covers the exhibition area, so I had a hard time finding my way out of the ‘Staff Only’ area. And when I finally thought I had escaped, I ended up coming out in a completely different place than where I had entered.

Did I wander into another dimension or something?

When I finally arrived at the entrance hall, the first thing I heard was Director Machimura saying,

“Don’t run in the halls!”

That’s not something you expect to be told once you’re past the age of twenty.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel a bit of satisfaction when I informed her that a bomb had been planted in her office. The staff who had been so stubbornly immovable were now in shock, while the previously frustrated investigation team instantly switched to professional mode and began moving—no one asked Director Machimura for permission anymore.

However, Director Machimura, the only one among the museum staff who remained composed, accompanied the bomb squad. If she hadn’t guided them, they probably wouldn’t have made it to the director’s office as quickly as they did.

It may have been out of pride, but more than that, it was out of a sense of responsibility as the director that she didn’t flee or abandon her post—if it were me, I’d have been more flustered and useless than the stunned staff.

And so, I returned to the director’s office as quickly as I could.

Ms. Kyoko was sitting on the floor, seemingly exhausted—her posture filled me with sudden anxiety. Had she failed? Maybe I should have persuaded her to wait quietly for the professionals instead of rolling up her sleeves—but in that urgent situation, even Assistant Officer Tobirai must have thought there was no other choice—yet, despite it all, in front of Ms. Kyoko was nothing more than a neatly disassembled laptop.

To think she had dismantled a digital device so thoroughly using just the tools available in the room—this wasn’t just the result of Assistant Officer Tobirai’s precise instructions; it was a masterful disassembly.

Well, leaving bomb disposal aside, ‘disassembly’ could be considered the detective’s domain—once the work had progressed this far, the professionals could take over—

“Oh, Mr. Kakushidate. You got back sooner than I expected,” Ms. Kyoko said, turning to look at me while still sitting on the floor, but in this situation, her words sounded almost sarcastic.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting, I mean, good work, we can leave the rest to these people—”

“It’s fine. It wasn’t a bomb after all,” she said casually.

Still wearing the helmet, Ms. Kyoko’s words were blunt.

“Not just the clock, but the laptop was a fake too. No matter how you look at it, there was no bomb.”

“…What?”

Had I jumped to conclusions? Was it just a case of mistaking an ordinary clock and laptop for a bomb out of fear?

No, that wasn’t it.

The mantel clock had ‘9010’ inscribed on it—there’s no doubt that it was planted by the bomber. That’s why, even after hearing that it wasn’t a bomb, neither the bomb squad members nor Director Machimura, the room’s owner, showed any signs of relief.

On the contrary, realizing that the ‘mantel clock’ was a fake only heightened the reality that the museum had been infiltrated by the culprit, and that the ‘real time bomb’ had yet to be found.

It made the situation feel all the more real.

The current time was 4:30 PM.

The maximum remaining time was three and a half hours—

“Director Machimura.”

As everyone, myself included, turned pale, Ms. Kyoko called out.

“While it turned out to be a fake, it wasn’t me who performed this disassembly—it was Assistant Officer Tobirai, who is currently guarding the museum gate. For the real bomb search, Assistant Officer Tobirai’s skills are indispensable. I fully understand your desire to protect the irreplaceable artworks, Director, but that’s precisely why I ask you to allow Assistant Officer Tobirai and her two invaluable partners to enter the museum. For the sake of protecting the art.”

Since Ms. Kyoko was still wearing the full-face helmet with the built-in intercom, her request must have reached Assistant Officer Tobirai as well—at such a crucial moment, the Forgetful Detective’s perfectly timed appeal in order to fulfill her promise with the ace was something Director Machimura couldn’t refuse.

19

When ‘QRETA 9010’ received what they had thought to be the last possible communication from their friend at the police station, they braced themself, expecting that something irreversible had happened—but that wasn’t the case. It was a report that Director Machimura and some of the staff who had been holding out against the investigation team were being taken from Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art to the police station, supposedly for protection and questioning.

Good.

It hadn’t gone according to plan, but it seemed the ‘mantel clock’ they had placed in the director’s office had worked—the tough Director Machimura couldn’t help but be subdued when she found out a bomb had been planted in her own office.

Oh, right—it wasn’t a bomb. Something that looked like a bomb.

Since the staff’s sit-in and refusal to evacuate were completely unexpected for ‘QRETA 9010,’ the bomber had to improvise with the materials on hand, resulting in a hastily thrown-together and frankly unsatisfactory ‘artwork,’ but all's well that ends well.

They were also genuinely pleased that the Forgetful Detective they had gone to such lengths to invite had performed brilliantly—although her actions, like arriving at the museum on a police motorcycle and bringing along the supposedly no-longer-needed Yakusuke Kakushidate, were beyond anything the criminal had anticipated. They couldn’t afford to let their guard down, but still, things were going well so far.

One more thing.

According to their friend at the police station, Officer Yura, the head of the investigation, and his team were finally arriving at Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art, just as the staff were being taken away. As the on-site commander, it was inevitable that he would come eventually, but the fact that Officer Yura wouldn’t be conducting the questioning of the museum staff, especially Director Machimura, was surprising and sort of too convenient for ‘QRETA 9010.’

It was fortunate for ‘QRETA 9010’ that the timing worked out so well—if the skilled officer had questioned them directly, he might have realized that the bomber's goal wasn’t to take Director Machimura’s life.

Of course, it would be discovered eventually, but if that ‘eventually’ came after 8:00 PM, nothing could be better. The more the investigation headed in the wrong direction, the closer the criminal would be to achieving their goal—so the two pieces of news they received were nothing short of good news.

That said, they felt a bit guilty towards their friend at the police station for taking the bother to give that report, since it was barely necessary—both the departure of Director Machimura's group and the arrival of Officer Yura's team would soon become apparent anyway.

From the perspective of 'QRETA 9010,' who was currently lurking inside Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art—it was only a matter of time.

Well, the sooner, the better.

If you're fast, no one can catch you.

After setting up the improvised 'mantel clock' in the director's office, 'QRETA 9010' didn't leave the museum—because for the bomber, the real game was just beginning.

20

When people heard that Assistant Officer Tobirai lost her sight in an accident during an investigation, they often assumed that her vision went completely dark—but since it was a hassle to explain, she just nodded and said, 'Yes, that's right.' In reality, it wasn't that simple.

There are degrees and types of vision loss.

It's not something that can be lumped together.

In Assistant Officer Tobirai's case, it's true that she made an unbelievable mistake while disarming a bomb and lost the ability to see light forever—but even if she could no longer see 'light,' she could still see 'shadows.'

It was both a literal shadow and a figurative one—the point is, the parts without light would stand out clearly through her sunglasses. Saying she could see only the darkness of this world might sound like something a middle schooler would joke about, which was a bit inappropriate, but ironically, having such a view dramatically improved her bomb disposal skills—after all, she could now see only the places that were out of sight.

She could visually pinpoint the places where a bomber would try to hide a bomb, not just sense them intuitively—and thus, the rise of the bomb squad's young ace, Azana Tobirai, began.

Double Dog Azana.

Thanks to Ms. Kyoko, she was finally able to get to work, guided by her partners—a guide dog, a Golden Retriever named Extension, on her left, and a police dog, a Doberman named Manicure. Tobirai first took a quick lap around the museum's exhibition area. It was surprising that Director Machimura apologized when she was being transported to the police station, but

even then, the director didn't forget to remind her to make sure that the dogs wouldn't damage any of the exhibits.

Tobirai couldn't help but feel as though her partners, her 'eyes,' had been insulted, but considering the director's recent experience of having the bomber infiltrate her office, she decided to let it slide and accepted the apology—besides, she could tell that the director was struggling to resist the urge to pat Extension and Manicure.

What irritated her more, though, was not something that could be blamed on the director: the museum was entirely lacking in accessibility. Even though she had memorized the floor plan, including the back areas, before coming, there were bumps and obstacles that couldn't be understood from the diagrams, and they were bothersome at every turn.

The floor was slanted in places, the walls twisted meaninglessly, and it was just difficult to walk normally—Extension seemed confused as well. Not only was this a personal frustration for Tobirai, but it also hindered the bomb squad's search efforts, which had only just begun after the protesters had finally dispersed—it was so different from usual that they couldn't proceed with their standard methods.

After completing the initial rough sweep and failing to find a bomb, it was hard to tell whether something had been overlooked or if there had never been a bomb in the first place.

After consulting with the leader of the bomb squad, they decided it was still too early to declare the area safe, so they agreed to search again, each taking a different route this time.

Understood.

Just as she was about to set off to check around the café area, she sensed someone approaching from behind—by the smell and the sound of footsteps, she could roughly figure out who it was. It was the person she had passed by about an hour earlier when she was lingering near the entrance—the detective she had passed by.

"Do you need something, Ms. Kyoko?"

"Oh."

The detective seemed surprised to be spoken to before she could say anything—but she quickly replied, "No, I just hadn't thanked you yet."

Thanked her? Oh, maybe about the police ID?

"That too, but also for teaching me the bomb disarming procedure," Ms. Kyoko said as she moved to stand directly in front of Tobirai—it's said that she's the fastest detective, but it might be more accurate to call her the detective who can't sit still. Even after the bomb squad began

their full-scale operation, she seemed to be bustling around all over the place (which is probably why they hadn't had a chance to greet each other until now).

Tobirai could make out her silhouette—the shape of the Forgetful Detective.

She seemed to be a rather petite and charming detective—Tobirai, who was self-conscious about her height, felt a pang of envy.

Tobirai shrugged her shoulders.

"Either way, it turned out to be a fake." She told Ms. Kyoko.

"If anything, I should be the one thanking you. Thanks to you, I've been able to do some good work—though guarding the gate was fun too."

"I'd like to talk to you a bit about when you were at the gate, actually."

"Hm?"

About when she was guarding the gate?

Ms. Kyoko smiled warmly—it was a smile without shadows.

So Tobirai couldn't discern her true intentions.

"I apologize for the trouble, but would you join me for some tea? There's something I'd like to discuss with you in private."

"…"

The fact that the Forgetful Detective, who was supposed to be absolutely bound by confidentiality, was emphasizing the word 'private' only gave Tobirai a sense of foreboding.

21

The café attached to the museum, 'Latte Art,' seemed to belong to a different faction from Director Machimura's group, who had decided to stay put. As soon as the warning video was released, they quickly decided to close temporarily—so there wasn't a single employee around, but Ms. Kyoko took on the role of waitress and graciously served us.

It was a bit overwhelming, but I think Ms. Kyoko simply wanted to wear the café's artistic uniform—by the way, when I say 'us,' I mean myself, Officer Yura who had just arrived in a police car, Officer Haraki, and Assistant Officer Tobirai, who had been brought along by Ms. Kyoko.

Oh, and I shouldn't forget Extension and Manicure—the guide dog and the police dog were quietly lying down under the table.

The director had granted the two dogs permission to enter the exhibition area, but the café area might have been a different story. Still, let's not split hairs. Ms. Kyoko made use of the kitchen (without permission) and served not only coffee and tea but also some light snacks—having not eaten anything since being suddenly taken to the police station, I was quite grateful for the ready-made sandwiches, given I was feeling a bit peckish.

Although, just taking something out of the fridge doesn't really count as Ms. Kyoko's home cooking.

"So? Ms. Kyoko, what is this private matter you wanted to discuss?"

Assistant Officer Tobirai asked.

As the bomb squad's ace, she probably didn't have time to be leisurely enjoying a tea break—she had been forced to sit idle for far too long, and she was undoubtedly itching to get back to work.

"It is indeed an odd gathering, with Officer Yura and Officer Haraki here as well."

She had a point.

It made me feel strange to be sitting with someone who had nearly wrongfully arrested me earlier that day—and having tea in a building where a bomb could be hidden at any moment was beyond strange.

Officer Yura and Officer Haraki, who had been invited for tea immediately upon arriving at the museum, also looked puzzled—but according to Ms. Kyoko, the host of this tea party, this was the only possible combination.

"Please keep this between us," Ms. Kyoko began.

"Now that the director and the staff have left, aside from myself and Mr. Kakushidate, the only people in this Machimura City Museum are members of law enforcement—"

The detective said, as if it was no big deal.

"It seems that '9010' is among them."

When Kyoko suggested that the bomber might be among the law enforcement officers, Officer Yura instinctively felt the urge to refute her. He almost lashed out at the detective for making such a careless statement, but it seemed she wasn't just throwing out baseless claims.

"That fake bomb that was placed in the director's office—when I briefly spoke with Director Machimura and her staff as they were leaving, they mentioned that both the clock and the laptop were originally part of the museum's equipment. But when they last saw the desk, those items weren't on it."

"...When they last saw the desk?" Assistant Officer Tobirai asked.

Her expertise might be bomb disposal rather than criminal investigation, but she was still a sharp officer—she might have already grasped what Kyoko was getting at.

"Just before they had their final confrontation with the investigation team in the hall—after the warning video was released, they were organizing the procedure for moving the exhibits out of the museum at that desk, so they were sure of it."

"…"

"You understand, don't you, Officer Yura? In other words, '9010' placed the fake bomb on the director's desk after that—afterwards, they used whatever materials were available nearby to create that so-called 'artwork.'"

It wasn't exactly an artwork.

Officer Yura hadn't seen it in person—but it had a signature on it, didn't it?

Perhaps that too was a touch added to make it seem more authentic—if not for that signature, Mr. Kakushidate might have overlooked the unusual mantel clock connected to the laptop (he was the one who discovered it. The fact that what he found turned out to be a fake bomb was just another story that fit his unfortunate tendency to be wrongly accused).

Well, the policeman understood how you could narrow down the time when the fake bomb was planted—questioning the museum director and staff before they were transferred to the station was a clear example of the sharp-eyed Forgetful Detective at work.

She was probably a good listener too.

That narrowing down might have been an unexpected twist for '9010'—but still, how did that lead her to conclude that '9010' is a member of the police? Even if she could specify the time, how could she narrow down the suspects?

"From a certain point in time, I was…"

At that moment, Assistant Officer Tobirai, who seemed to have already figured it out, spoke up—or perhaps Kyoko had hinted at this before bringing her here.

“I was stationed at the entrance, acting as a gatekeeper, so that's why, right?”

“Yes,” the detective nodded as if she had been waiting for this.

“So at that time, the museum had essentially become a giant locked room—I checked just to be sure, but as you’d expect from a meticulous director, all the back doors, emergency exits, and windows were securely locked. While it was possible to exit from the inside, no one could enter from outside.”

So that’s why this detective was moving around the museum so persistently even after the bomb squad started their operations—she was confirming the locks.

A locked room.

What a convenient term to use.

“Indeed, I—along with Extension and Manicure—did not allow anyone other than law enforcement personnel to pass through that entrance. Except for you and Mr. Kakushidate, of course.”

“Well, you could say we’re practically part of the police,” Kyoko said with a nonchalant smile.

Considering she was lent a police ID (which was quite something), it wasn't exactly a lie—apparently, Assistant Officer Tobirai let them through because she smelled Officer Yura’s scent on them.

In any case, Kyoko and the young Kakushidate could vouch for each other’s innocence—despite the fact that a client and a detective have a relationship of mutual interest, it was certain that these two didn’t have the time to create an impromptu (fake) bomb.

Given that the (fake) bomb was cobbled together on the spot using materials within reach, it wouldn't have been possible to prepare it "in advance," as they thought during the reasoning about the (real) car bomb in the multi-level parking lot—so what did that mean? The person who placed the (fake) bomb in the director’s office must have been someone who was inside the museum at that time—in other words, the investigators and the bomb squad.

Police officers.

“No, wait a minute—couldn’t the museum staff have done it too? To go to extremes, what if it was all a ruse by the director herself—”

Officer Haraki, who had been silent up until now, finally spoke up, probably having trouble keeping up with the situation even more than Officer Yura—being a young, passionate rookie, it was likely more difficult for him than for the seasoned Officer Yura to accept the conclusion that the culprit might be someone from the police.

And his youthful logic was sound.

If anything, considering the crime scene was in the back area, wouldn't it make more sense for the staff, who are familiar with the place, to be the prime suspects?

"That's actually not the case. As Officer Yura mentioned earlier—the fake bomb was signed with '9010.'"

Kyoko gently addressed the hot-blooded young officer.

"That signature was also written using some paint found nearby—but the reason for that signature, as Officer Yura deduced, was likely because, without it, there was a high chance no one would recognize it as a bomb."

Calling it a deduction was a bit embarrassing. As was pointed out a few hours ago, deductions without evidence weren't an officer's job.

"But in that case, shouldn't the signature have been 'QRETA 9010'? That's the name they used in the warning video, after all."

"…? Are you saying it should have been a full name? Isn't it just a matter of shortening the name—like an initialed signature? After all, we're calling the culprit '9010' ourselves—"

To this counterargument from Officer Haraki,

"The only ones referring to 'QRETA 9010' as '9010' are law enforcement personnel," Kyoko calmly responded.

That was right. That was exactly right.

It was annoying to call the culprit by the name they chose for themselves, and to avoid confusion with the regular museum staff who were also curators, Officer Yura, as the lead investigator, decided on the shorthand—Kyoko and Mr. Kakushidate picked it up just because they heard Officer Yura and Officer Haraki using it.

Words were contagious.

But—when and where did '9010' themself catch it?

“Moreover, the name ‘QRETA 9010’ was likely chosen as a username to avoid duplication when posting the video—the numbers added to the end probably don’t have any particular significance—the essence is in ‘QRETA,’ and ‘9010’ is just a secondary part. If they were to abbreviate the signature, it would make more sense for them to sign just as ‘QRETA,’ wouldn’t it? And yet, the culprit signed it as ‘9010.’ Why did the culprit use a code that’s only circulated within the police?”

“—Are you suggesting it’s because they’re someone within the police?”

Officer Yura said weakly, taking a sip of tea to fill the silence—her reasoning made sense. It might seem like an armchair theory, and it could be dismissed as a simple ‘coincidence,’ but as the one who had originally decided on the name ‘9010,’ it wasn’t something he could overlook.

At the very least, in this situation where they desperately needed even the smallest lead—

“Even if it’s a bit rash to conclude from this alone that ‘9010’ is a member of law enforcement—it’s worth considering the possibility that the culprit might have an accomplice within the police.”

Assistant Officer Tobirai offered a more realistic interpretation.

“Is that why this secret meeting is with this specific group?”

“Yes. In any case, these are the members who can be ruled out as ‘9010’ candidates. Myself and Mr. Kakushidate, who can vouch for each other’s innocence, Officer Yura and Officer Haraki, who hadn’t yet arrived at the museum when the fake bomb was planted, and Assistant Officer Tobirai, who, along with her two partners, was prohibited from entering the museum.”

Kyoko stated, as if reciting a line from the resolution of a detective novel—though that line had been altered far from any resolution.

“The culprit is not among us.”

23

For someone like me, who’s always under suspicion, Ms. Kyoko’s firm declaration was not only reassuring but genuinely heartening. However, even if it felt like we’d somewhat narrowed down the identity of the bomber, "QRETA 9010," it didn’t seem like we were making any real progress.

If anything, the situation seemed to be worsening—and time was running out.

“If the culprit is indeed part of the bomb squad, it’s the worst-case scenario. We’re dealing with a professional who’s trying to misuse their expertise in explosives.”

Assistant Officer Tobirai said this with a pained expression—indeed, it reminded me of those detective novels where the detective turns out to be the culprit. On the other hand, it's only natural that she'd want to believe in her colleagues, the very people she entrusts with her life, so her feelings must be complicated.

The same goes for Officer Yura, the commanding officer, and Officer Haraki, the rookie—they must feel similarly conflicted. In that sense, Ms. Kyoko and I are the carefree outsiders. And having planted a seed of intense suspicion among the investigators, the carefree outsider cheerfully declared,

"Well then, let's call this tea party to a close. Let's each return to our investigations. I wish you all the best of luck."

Ms. Kyoko said, calling off the meeting.

There wasn't any definitive countermeasure to the suspicions that had arisen, and with the priority being the search for the bomb, the police decided to simply 'keep an eye on their colleagues' and returned to their posts—after seeing the three of them off, Ms. Kyoko and I headed towards the exhibition area. Despite coming to the museum, we hadn't had a chance to see the main exhibit yet, having spent our time poking around the back areas and checking the locks.

Strictly speaking, the reason I was accompanying Ms. Kyoko was that I was still the client accused of the parking garage bombing and hadn't been completely cleared of suspicion. Now that those suspicions had been fully dispelled, I should've been able to finally go home—but after getting this involved, just saying, "Well, I'll be off then!" would make people question my character, even if I'd been cleared of any wrongdoing.

So, without any particular ideas, I found myself following Ms. Kyoko, hoping to be of some help—a behavior not much different from that of a stalker. But, at least Ms. Kyoko seemed to be genuinely enjoying the museum's exhibits.

From the permanent exhibits to the special exhibitions, she was smiling and following the route, taking everything in.

She had already taken off the waitress uniform and was now dressed in a vivid purple outfit, unified with the clothes she'd borrowed from Director Machimura's closet—without permission. Well, even though her outfit was unified, unlike the director, she had added accents in different shades of purple, creating a gradient effect that allowed her to wear the color without it being too loud. But observing her audacity, what Ms. Kyoko is doing isn't all that different from what '9010' is doing—quickly changing outfits using only what's available on-site is quite impressive.

Not only have I never seen her wear the same outfit twice, it's getting to the point where I've lost track.

"I'm making up for the time when I didn't own a single piece of casual clothing. Not that I remember it, of course."

"I see—"

"I'm just kidding. I'm trying to evaluate the exhibits from Director Machimura's perspective."

Huh? What does she mean by that?

Unlike the investigation team, and unlike me, Ms. Kyoko must believe that '9010' isn't targeting Director Machimura's life—besides, the director had evacuated with the staff, so in a way, you could say she's out of the culprit's reach, right?

"What if the whole point was to drive Director Machimura out of the museum? What if that's why they planted the fake bomb in her office?"

"..."

Now that she mentions it, that seems like the only reason for planting that fake bomb... If it was just a threat, the demonstration in the parking garage would've been enough. '9010' even managed to sow doubt within the investigation team, so it's unlikely that the fake bomb was meaningless.

"But, I still don't get it. If they're so concerned about not causing any casualties, whether it's for aesthetics or whatever, why even plant a bomb in the first place?"

No matter how careful you are, accidents can happen…

"Maybe the goal of '9010' wasn't to avoid casualties, but to clear the place of people?"

"To clear the place? For what?"

"Well, if they announce the explosion for after closing time, everyone would evacuate—except for someone like Director Machimura. That would leave the museum completely empty."

"So then—what's the point of blowing up an empty museum?"

"There might be something to do before the explosion, don't you think?"

Ms. Kyoko said this as she admired a painting by an up-and-coming artist—though whether it was a painting of a high-rise building or the sea was hard to tell. If it was a painting, that is. Anyway, she was admiring something as she spoke.

“For example, theft.”

24

Threatening to plant a bomb and then stealing the exhibits from an empty museum—this hypothesis, which assumes ‘QRETA 9010’ to be a master thief rather than a bomber, had a certain level of credibility.

It was much easier to understand than a bomber holding a grudge against Director Machimura or the artists and resorting to such a despicable act—exploding the parking garage as a demonstration also fits with this theory. Well, it’s still not something you can easily accept, but there was a certain logic to it.

Given that no one knew where the bomb was planted, the staff couldn’t remove the exhibits—resulting in the failure to completely evacuate the place… Hmm.

“That’s why I borrowed Director Machimura’s clothes. I thought I’d try to imagine which exhibits a thief might target by putting myself in her shoes.”

It seemed more like an excuse to change clothes than anything else (though she did mention that the clothes themselves were of good quality). Still, it seemed she wasn’t just enjoying the contemporary art on display.

She was evaluating the art. Searching for pieces that could be targeted for theft.

Well, regardless of their artistic value as art, when it comes to price evaluation, this is Ms. Kyoko’s area of expertise. You could even say it’s her specialty. It’s not necessarily the case that ‘9010’ is trying to steal the most expensive piece in the museum—nor is it certain that they’re only after one piece—but still.

“—So, the bombing is just a threat, then? If clearing the place out was the only goal, there’s no need to actually plant a time bomb, right?”

Even if the goal is theft, it’s still a nefarious act, but at that moment, I couldn’t help but let a note of relief creep into my voice—after all, the thought that there might be a bomb in the building you’re currently standing in is far from comforting.

But just when I started to feel as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders,

“If ‘9010’ wants to conceal their true goal of art theft, then the bombing will probably happen as planned—to destroy the evidence.”

Ms. Kyoko did nothing to reassure me.

Destroy the evidence.

Right, just like how they blew up the van that had holes drilled into it—once something is blown up, it becomes impossible to tell which pieces are missing. But such an attempt to cover up the crime seems far from the behavior of an art-loving thief.

Stealing only what they want and then blowing everything else to bits—no, we still can’t say for sure that’s the truth. The theory that this is all a crime born from hatred for the director is still a reasonable suspicion.

However, if that hypothesis is correct, then the suspicion that ‘9010’ is among the investigation team becomes even more credible. If the culprit plans to set off a time bomb, what possible reason could they have to remain at the scene? Unless they’re pretending to search for the bomb while secretly stealing the exhibits, hidden from their accomplices—

“So, the person who was particularly adamant about stopping the staff from taking out the exhibits is suspicious, right?”

“It’s possible. But…”

Ms. Kyoko carefully chose her words.

“If they’re going to steal the exhibits, physically large pieces would be impossible. Even with accomplices, they’d have to be something a person could carry—yet, as I look around, I don’t see any pieces that seem worth committing a crime for. They’re certainly not cheap, but they’re all within a price range that’s generally affordable.”

Ms. Kyoko’s eye for appraisal is undoubtedly sharp.

Of course, it depends on the scale of the crime, but it’s true that it would be rare for a piece of contemporary art to be worth committing a crime that would land you in prison for the rest of your life (if there had been any casualties in the parking garage bombing, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say the death penalty could have been on the table). Historical artworks are valuable primarily because the artists are dead. Geniuses are often only appreciated after their deaths. Most of the artists whose works are displayed here are still alive.

“That’s right. Well, there’s also ‘9010’s personal taste to consider, so for now, let’s just go through all the exhibits, including the limited-time special exhibition—ah.”

At that moment, Ms. Kyoko suddenly stopped walking along the designated route.

“I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Huh? Figured out what—”

Could it be that she’s identified which artwork ‘9010’ is targeting—or maybe she’s even figured out the true identity of ‘9010’ in one fell swoop?

“No, no. That’s not it. What I’ve figured out is where ‘9010’ has planted the bomb in this museum. While thinking about which exhibit might be targeted, I happened to realize where the bomb is hidden.”

'I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning,' she said with such a casual air that I was speechless. But before I could fulfill my role as her assistant by asking where it was,

“Ms. Kyoko. Mr. Kakushidate.”

A hushed voice cut in—it was Assistant Officer Tobirai (along with Extension and Manicure).

“Sorry to interrupt your conversation. Do you have a moment? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you—in private.”

“Huh?”

Ms. Kyoko tilted her head in confusion at the interruption just as she was about to solve the mystery. Perhaps she thought that secrecy was her domain—or maybe she was wondering why we were having another secret meeting so soon after the last one had ended.

But it seems Assistant Officer Tobirai, who had apparently rushed back to us almost immediately after returning to her station following the meeting, didn’t care about our reactions and continued speaking in a lowered voice.

“Excuse me. While I was searching for the location of the bomb, I happened to figure out the true identity of ‘9010’.”

It was around 5:00 PM when this strange reversal occurred, where the bomb squad expert identified the culprit and the master detective pinpointed the location of the time bomb—leaving us with only three hours.

25

‘QRETA 9010’ was ashamed of relying too much on information from a friend at the police station—because of that dependency, not only had their infiltration into the investigation team

been exposed, but there was also the risk that their friend might be treated as an accomplice to the bomber.

That had to be avoided. The friend knew nothing.

No, they did know something, but they couldn't possibly imagine that the person they were casually chatting with was the notorious 'QRETA 9010'—it wouldn't even cross their mind.

Along with the shame, there was also anger.

The criminal had anticipated that setting the 'clock' in the director's office would narrow down the suspects to some extent, but it was an unavoidable measure, and as 'QRETA 9010,' they had expected the suspicion to fall more on the staff—that's why they used items from the room to create the fake bomb.

But to think that the signature '9010' would turn against them—it was infuriating because 'QRETA 9010' hadn't abbreviated their signature to '9010' just because they were influenced by the terminology used by their friend at the police station.

It was simply because they weren't confident in their ability to write the 'QRETA' part of 'QRETA 9010' with a paintbrush in one go—without a draft. Considering the fancy font they had used for the name, it wouldn't look genuine if it was written in simple letters now.

*TL Note: in the original, "Curator" is written in old kanjis, way more complicated than normal ones. This should be a good approximation

Perhaps it was the curse of being part of the word processor generation.

In the first place, they had chosen the title of 'Curator' to direct suspicion toward the staff (it's not like they could call themself 'OFFICER 110!'), so for the police to assume that the culprit was someone within the force just because they used internal jargon was a stretch—but if the conclusion drawn from faulty reasoning turned out to be correct, it would all be considered valid.

What a mess. How could everything keep going so wrong? Who knew that committing a crime could be so difficult? You don't realize until you actually try. Action had to be taken quickly. If the investigation had progressed this far, it was only a matter of time before the Forgetful Detective uncovered the bomber's true identity.

And when it came to matters of time, no one surpassed the Forgetful Detective—in fact, she might have already figured it out.

Fortunately, 'QRETA 9010' was in a position to quickly learn the contents of the secret meeting, or rather, the tea party, hosted by the Forgetful Detective at the café. It was possible to manipulate some of the information regarding the hunt for the traitor—but that would only buy

time. Ultimately, the only way to counter the Forgetful Detective's deductions was to address the root of the problem.

What to do? The answer was clear.

They had to make her forget.

The truth of the matter, the fastest deductions, the bomb, and the true identity of 'QRETA 9010'—they would have to erase everything, clean and clear, even if it meant speeding up the schedule. In fact, it was already too late to be speeding things up—yet 'QRETA 9010' had been unable to activate their plan against the Forgetful Detective because that walking false accusation, Yakusuke Kakushidate, who should have long since been out of the picture, had been stuck to her like glue.

Why wouldn't he leave?

There were always people like that, oblivious to the situation. That was why he was constantly under suspicion—but considering that it was their own actions that dragged him into this case, they couldn't just keep complaining.

No choice. Time to do what needed to be done.

26

"The time bomb is in the storage room."

"'9010' is Officer Haraki."

The detective and the inspector simultaneously stated what they each believed to be the truth on the count of three—the storage room, as the name suggests, is the area where the museum's stored works are kept, and Officer Haraki, as you might recall, is Officer Yura's young partner and one of the officers who almost mistakenly arrested me—but, huh?

The storage room hadn't even come up in conversation until now, so how did this sudden burst of inspiration occur? Officer Haraki was a member of the secret meeting and seemed to be one of the characters outside the suspect pool, just like me, so how was he suddenly revealed as the unexpected culprit in this twist?

I was already overwhelmed, but now I had two things to be confused about at once.

"…Shall we talk as we move? If the bomb is really where Ms. Kyoko says it is, we need to act quickly."

Assistant Officer Tobirai didn't press for details on the spot but instead urged us to head out—she seemed to know, at least generally, how to reach the storage room, even if that answer had come out of nowhere.

"Yes. I've memorized the entire floor plan. But it's a blind spot—I never even considered it. After all, that area is not just off-limits to the public, it's off-limits even to most of the staff—it's like a vault with a locked door."

"If we're talking about blind spots, Officer Haraki being the culprit is one too. I would very much like to know how you reached that conclusion."

Exchanging somewhat mismatched comments that seemed to swap their areas of expertise, we headed to the second floor—apparently, the storage room was located there.

I'm proud to say that I alone didn't lose sight of my specialty, which was 'I don't understand anything! What are these people talking about!?' I hunched over and followed them, feeling utterly out of my depth.

But I see.

Having just been discussing it, I could barely keep up with Ms. Kyoko's train of thought.

Assuming that '9010' was planning to steal one of the exhibits, when considering which piece might be the target, she must have realized that the museum's collection isn't limited to what's on display.

The exhibition space is limited, and there are also temporary exhibits—like at the Louvre Museum in Paris, which I embarrassingly didn't visit, they often rotate artworks in and out.

In other words, the storage room is a place where artworks are kept more securely, and as Assistant Officer Tobirai put it, it's like a vault that even authorized personnel can't easily access. It's quite different from the open backstage area or the accessible back rooms—so Ms. Kyoko must have deduced that it would make a fitting location to hide a bomb.

"I see. Indeed, the storage room was outside the search area. No matter who the culprit is, it's a place they shouldn't have been able to access—but perhaps that was just a preconceived notion. '9010' might have found a way to open the vault door somehow."

"…If the culprit is a police officer, they might have persuaded a museum staff member to secretly lend them a key, or subtly extracted the passcode."

'Somehow.'

I was just saying what came to mind, but Ms. Kyoko agreed with me, saying, "That's possible."

“That being said, I still can’t agree with the conclusion that Officer Haraki is the culprit at this point… Assistant Officer Tobirai, what led you to such a deduction?”

“To be honest, I couldn’t believe it at first either. But when Ms. Kyoko pointed out that ‘9010’ could be someone connected to the police, it opened my eyes—it allowed me to break free from the absolute preconception that a police officer couldn’t possibly be the culprit. I’ll explain in detail later, but after remembering some rumors an old colleague once told me, I made a call—and as a result, I discovered a certain fact.”

Without missing a beat, Assistant Officer Tobirai continued as we moved forward.

It was like a ‘solution arc,’ completely stealing the detective’s thunder.

“It’s about the relationship between Officer Haraki and Director Machimura. Their surnames are different, but they’re actually siblings.”

“What—”

Could such a coincidence really exist? Or is it not a coincidence? If what both Ms. Kyoko and Assistant Officer Tobirai are saying is correct, then ‘9010’ wouldn’t have even needed to use his police badge to open the storage room’s locked door—he could simply have his ‘sister’ tell him.

Were they accomplices? Or did he just take advantage of their relationship?

Was he using his position as a police officer, and also as her younger brother?

We had been implying that Director Machimura’s involvement in the fake bomb incident might have been a setup, but—

“Of course, I’m not assuming he’s the culprit just because he’s the director’s brother and kept that fact hidden. Even so, based on Ms. Kyoko’s deductions, Officer Haraki should be excluded from the list of suspects—”

That’s right. Exactly. When the fake bomb was placed in the director’s office, Officer Haraki should have been in the patrol car with Officer Yura.

“—But even that can be explained by a certain trick.”

“As a detective who's late to the party, I’d love to hear about it as soon as possible.”

Ms. Kyoko said, as if trying to calm the enthusiastic Assistant Officer Tobirai down for a moment—because of what came next.

“We’ve arrived before that. Is this the storage room? Hmm.”

What we found was a massive shutter. Since large works of art are sometimes stored here, it was only natural—but naturally, it was securely locked. There were no signs of it being forced open. There was no trace of a bomber or a thief having broken in—no, the shutter looked sturdy, more like a solid wall than just a door.

The locking mechanism was a passcode system.

Pausing the mystery-solving for a moment, Assistant Officer Tobirai used her radio to contact someone—likely the police station, instructing them to ask the museum staff, who should have arrived by now, for the passcode.

Of course, she made sure to get the information from someone other than Director Machimura—someone other than Officer Haraki’s sister.

When Assistant Officer Tobirai quickly input the response she received, the hidden door opened easily.

“Please do not stray from behind me,” the bomb disposal expert said to Ms. Kyoko and me before entering.

Unlike the first-floor exhibition area, the works stored here were simply lined up in a way that felt more like a catalog than a display—they were not arranged for viewing pleasure. The room was kept at a low temperature, likely for preservation purposes, making it uncomfortably chilly.

Of course, that doesn’t mean I’d want to warm up with a bomb.

“If you spot anything that looks like a bomb, even if it seems fake, please tell me immediately. I’ll handle it.”

“You’re very reliable,” Ms. Kyoko said, apparently intending to leave it all to the professional and staying a few steps behind her—well, whether it’s a real bomb or a fake one, once a day is more than enough bomb disposal.

“…Why did you specialize in bomb disposal, Assistant Officer Tobirai?”

Trying to remain vigilant of our surroundings, but also feeling awkward in the silence, I asked her that, as she walked ahead of us.

“? Are you asking why I stayed in the bomb squad despite having an accident that cost me my sight? Well, that’s because—”

She started to answer immediately, as if it was a question she'd been asked many times before, but that wasn't what I meant. No, what I wanted to know was, from what I'd heard her say earlier, it seemed like she had some detective-like qualities, so why did she become so knowledgeable about bombs in the first place?

"Hmm. I suppose it's because of my father's influence."

"Your father's influence? Was your father a police officer in the bomb squad?"

"No, he was in construction. He's retired now and living a leisurely life. You see, in building demolition work, they use explosives—so having grown up watching him work, it's no surprise that his daughter ended up working in demolition too. I suppose it wouldn't be wrong to call me a daddy's girl. I'm sure my father is lamenting it as well."

"No, no, I'm sure he's very proud of you."

After hearing Ms. Kyoko say that, Assistant Officer Tobirai, perhaps out of social politeness or genuine curiosity, asked, "By the way, Ms. Kyoko, why did you become a detective?"

Strictly speaking, she should have been asking me about my job, but probably because of the incident where the van I used for work got blown up, I'll likely soon be losing my job at the delivery company I currently work for, so I was relieved not to be asked anything—meanwhile, Ms. Kyoko, who was asked the question in a sort of collateral damage way, responded evasively,

"It's not that I became a detective; rather, it's because I'm a detective that I am who I am."

How Assistant Officer Tobirai took that response, I don't know, but it was a typical answer from Ms. Kyoko.

As I thought that, I glanced at the storage shelves lined up on either side of us. The oppressive feeling was almost overwhelming. With Assistant Officer Tobirai being guided by her seeing-eye dog Extension, and the bomb-sniffing dog Manicure, and after Ms. Kyoko had checked everything, there was no way I could possibly find anything—huh?

What is that?

27

It was just a clock. Not even a fake bomb, and not an art piece either. It was just a functional wall clock—it seemed I was getting overly sensitive.

But I couldn't relax just yet. The clock was pointing to 5:30 PM, reminding me that less than two and a half hours remained—150 minutes, to the point where it might be better to start counting the time in minutes.

With that in mind, I hurried to catch up with Ms. Kyoko and the others, who had gone ahead, rounding the corner of the storage shelves—but the moment I turned the corner, I stopped in my tracks once again.

Ms. Kyoko was lying on the floor.

"M-Ms. Kyo—!"

"Please don't shout, Mr. Kakushidate. She's just unconscious."

As I panicked, a surprisingly calm voice reached out to me—it was from the woman in the large sunglasses standing there, not even attempting to help the fallen Ms. Kyoko, but instead facing me.

It was Assistant Officer Tobirai.

"W-What? Just unconscious—?"

"I used oil paint solvent. It's a type of organic solvent. It's just makeshift equipment like what I used to create the fake bomb, but it's fairly effective as an improvised sleeping agent, I'd say."

"S-Sleeping a—"

"Don't move. I can't see, but these two can."

Saying that, Assistant Officer Tobirai gestured toward Extension and Manicure—she wasn't threatening me with a knife or a gun.

And yet, my entire body froze up.

The dogs—animals.

If used as a weapon, their raw nature carries a sense of intimidation far greater than any knife or gun. I couldn't help but sympathize with Director Machimura's decision to ban them from the museum—although, why? Why would Assistant Officer Tobirai do something like this, something as literal as baring her fangs—towards Ms. Kyoko?

Does she understand what it means to put the Forgetful Detective to sleep, even with makeshift tools or whatever?

A forced reset.

It's like pulling the plug, bringing all the deductions she's pieced together so far right back to square one. What possible benefit could this have for Assistant Officer Tobirai—this is almost like—like.

"That's right. I am '9010.' Oh, I suppose I should say 'QRETA 9010' to keep my identity hidden, shouldn't I?"

Though Assistant Officer Tobirai spoke in a joking tone, she wasn't smiling at all.

This can't be—wasn't it supposed to be Officer Haraki? But such doubts were utterly foolish. Of course, that was just a blatant lie—Officer Haraki isn't '9010,' and he's probably not even related to Director Machimura. That whole story was just a pretext to lure Ms. Kyoko to a secluded place.

"Yes, I couldn't believe my luck when Ms. Kyoko herself suggested going to the storage room. A lot of inconvenient things had been happening that could have ruined my plans, so I guess it's only fair that I got at least one stroke of luck."

Things hadn't gone according to plan for '9010'… It seems Ms. Kyoko's guess was correct, but unfortunately, that deviation from the plan ended up putting Ms. Kyoko in danger.

Oil paint solvent… She said it was a substitute for a sleeping agent, but is it really safe to inhale something like that? I had an urge to rush over to Ms. Kyoko, but when I saw Assistant Officer Tobirai release Manicure's leash, I stopped myself just in time.

Was she going to give Manicure a command? Attack? Neither.

Assistant Officer Tobirai reached for her waist and pulled out a pair of handcuffs from her belt—then, just like she had tossed her police ID to Ms. Kyoko earlier in the day, she casually passed the handcuffs to me.

"There's a pillar right there where you're standing, isn't there? Restrain yourself behind your back. And don't try to fake it—I don't want to have to make Manicure a killer."

"…"

I had no choice but to comply.

If it was only my life being threatened, I might have chosen to resist and fight back, even if it was a reckless move… But seeing Manicure, now off the leash and sniffing around Ms. Kyoko's throat, left me with no option but to obey.

I was overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness.

So that's it.

Even if you say the museum was a large closed room, the key to that closed room was held by just one person—Assistant Officer Tobirai, who was serving as a gatekeeper at the entrance. The closed-room scenario was only possible because of her testimony that no one else had entered except for Ms. Kyoko and me.

The logic itself wasn't wrong.

But with this system, the gatekeeper herself could come and go freely—passing by the arguing detectives and staff in the hall and slipping into the director's office was as easy as having an 'all-access pass.'

No pets allowed? What rule says that has to be strictly followed?

On the contrary, it was the gatekeeper's unlawful entry that led to the rule being overturned—ironically, Ms. Kyoko had unwittingly helped with that.

No, it's not ironic.

Now that I think about it, Assistant Officer Tobirai had let us through far too easily—and had subtly suggested that we should search areas other than the exhibition area. The unexpected plan to consult on bomb disposal via the helmet intercom might have been off-script, but the move to negotiate the rules with Director Machimura after the fake bomb was found in the director's office fit perfectly with her plan.

"Because of that, now police officers are under suspicion, so things aren't going according to plan at all. For now, I was chosen as a member of the secret meeting, but it was only a matter of time before I would be suspected—moreover, the Forgetful Detective might have suspected me from the start and invited me to the meeting."

'I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning'—indeed.

It's unclear how much Ms. Kyoko had figured out about the true identity of '9010'—and now, we'll never know.

Because she forgot.

After confirming that I had restrained myself, Assistant Officer Tobirai lifted Ms. Kyoko's upper body—not to help her, but to tie her to a different pillar. Since there were no more handcuffs, she picked up a rope from nearby. Makeshift tools—as it was a storage room, there was plenty of string or rope around.

Even as Ms. Kyoko was tied to the pillar while unconscious, there was no sign of her waking up. Ah, it's so frustrating. I wanted to run over and shake her awake right now—but after tying her up tightly, Assistant Officer Tobirai came over to me with the leftover rope. She tied my already handcuffed wrists again from above—I wondered why she was being so thorough, but it seemed she intended to retrieve the handcuffs at the end.

"I can't leave them behind, after all. These are police property. It would be strange if a burnt corpse was found with police handcuffs on—so I need to tie you both up with something that will burn away."

Burnt corpse?

Suddenly, it hit me—how much worse my situation was than I'd imagined. If Ms. Kyoko's deduction—now forgotten—was correct, and there was a bomb in this storage room, then being tied up like this means—!

"W-Wait—Assistant Officer Tobirai! Just take me! If you want to silence someone, there's no need to kill Ms. Kyoko too! You've already made her forget the deductions that were only in her mind—"

I had no choice; it was my mistake for following along so easily. I should have just gone home when I was cleared of suspicion, but I foolishly stayed at the scene and ended up learning a truth I didn't need to know.

So I understand why she wants to get rid of me.

But at least leave Ms. Kyoko out of it—there's no need to tie her to a pillar like that. Just carry her, unconscious, and say something like, 'We got attacked,' and take her to Officer Yura. That would solve everything. And if you need a scapegoat, you can pin the blame on me, the one who's gone missing.

"That's true. You were quite a handful by not leaving—your role was already finished, after all."

"My role…?"

What is she talking about? No, wait, I think I know. Ms. Kyoko's overthinking—the theory that I was being framed as the bomber just to bring the Forgetful Detective onto the stage.

No way.

No way, no way, no way.

The culprit's goal wasn't to steal the exhibits, or to get revenge on Director Machimura, or even to commit a prank.

"You-did you create this entire incident just to kill Ms. Kyoko?"

"Of course."

'QRETA 9010' nodded.

"My motive is revenge."

28

Assistant Officer Azana Tobirai, or rather 'QRETA 9010,' spoke to the young Kakushidate, who was still in shock, as if reciting a slogan: "The Forgetful Detective. Confidentiality is strictly guaranteed. Any case will be solved within a day—and forgotten by tomorrow."

"But it's terrible to be the one forgotten, isn't it? As a regular client of the Forgetful Detective, I'm sure you can understand this feeling, can't you?"

"..."

Whether he understood or not was irrelevant, as Kakushidate didn't respond—she continued without waiting for an answer.

"You see, I didn't just hear rumors about Ms. Kyoko. I've actually worked on a case with her before—that's when I lost my eyesight."

"…Are you saying it was Ms. Kyoko's fault?"

"Well, who knows."

Assistant Officer Tobirai dodged the question and put the recovered handcuffs back on her belt—then reached into Kakushidate's pocket and pulled out his smartphone. A smartphone filled with the contact information of various detectives.

What to do?

She couldn't leave it there, but she couldn't take it with her either—just as it would be strange for a burnt corpse to have handcuffs on, it would be just as odd in this day and age for a dead body to be found without a cell phone.

It would also be strange if it were broken.

After thinking for a moment, she placed the phone on a shelf, away from both Kakushidate and Ms. Kyoko—she considered turning it off, but there might be an incoming call before the bomb goes off. In today's world, it would be unnatural to leave the phone off. Everyone carries a portable charger around these days—so she decided to leave it as it was.

Good grief.

In situations like this, dealing with the Forgetful Detective, who didn't carry any electronic devices, was so simple—what a fragile detective she was.

So fragile. It was almost surprising that no one had sought revenge against her until now.

"W-Wait—answer me! What happened in the case where you worked together?"

"What's the point in telling you? As you said yourself, Ms. Kyoko has completely forgotten all about it—and besides, you're about to die in an explosion."

"...Please, Assistant Officer Tobirai. Don't do this."

She didn't even let him finish his desperate plea. She gagged the young Kakushidate with the same handkerchief soaked in organic solvent that she had used to put Ms. Kyoko to sleep—of course, this handkerchief was also something she had taken from the museum's back room.

Improvised tools.

According to her prior research, this storage room was soundproof, so Assistant Officer Tobirai wasn't worried about him calling for help—what she feared was that he might use voice commands to operate the smartphone she had confiscated.

He needed to sleep too.

Leaving the young Kakushidate, who had seemingly drifted off to the dream world like the Forgetful Detective, Assistant Officer Tobirai, or rather, 'QRETA 9010,' guided by her guide dog Extension and accompanied by the police dog Manicure, exited the storage room—to report to the bomb squad leader that everything in the storage room was all clear.

Of course, as promised to the museum staff who had given her the passcode, she made sure to lock the shutters properly.

I wasn’t asleep.

The smell was awful, the taste was terrible, and I was almost knocked out, but since it was reused after being used on Ms. Kyoko, the sleeping effect seemed to be weaker—I was able to at least muster the presence of mind to pretend to pass out.

However, it’s hard to say that my pretending to be asleep paid off. Before I could take advantage of any opening, Assistant Officer Tobirai had already left.

All I did was choke on the chemical fumes. Maybe it would have been easier if I had fallen asleep, like Ms. Kyoko who was peacefully dozing nearby—but after a while, as I started to calm down from my confusion, I realized I was furious, too angry to sleep.

It wasn’t anger at Assistant Officer Tobirai, or ‘9010,’ for her crime. It wasn’t directed at Ms. Kyoko’s innocent sleeping face either—of course not. It was anger at myself.

Why didn’t I realize?

That the goal of Assistant Officer Tobirai was revenge against the Forgetful Detective—no, expecting myself to realize that was unreasonable. The records of the cases Ms. Kyoko worked on in the past are completely erased—that’s why she’s called the Forgetful Detective. No matter what kind of connection existed between Assistant Officer Tobirai and Ms. Kyoko, it would have been impossible for me, an outsider, to perceive it.

But—to think that someone would hold a grudge over being forgotten.

No matter what kind of case they worked on together, I can’t imagine that Ms. Kyoko did something that caused Assistant Officer Tobirai to lose her eyesight, but whatever tragedy befell them, it seemed what Assistant Officer Tobirai couldn’t forgive was that Ms. Kyoko had forgotten it.

If someone asked me, I'd have to admit I kind of understood that feeling—there are likely those who would feel as if their very existence was denied if they were greeted with “Nice to meet you” every time they met.

If I were to say that I had never felt that way—no, this is Stockholm syndrome. What good does it do to empathize with Assistant Officer Tobirai? Am I hoping she’s ‘actually a good person’ and that she’ll change her mind and come back to save us? Whatever her reasons, she’s the one who committed a serious crime just to get revenge on Ms. Kyoko!

She didn’t hesitate at all to involve me—my lingering around might not have been part of her original plan, but even though she adjusted her plans, she never considered canceling them. From the moment she set a time limit, her goal from the start as ‘QRETA 9010’ was to lure Ms.

Kyoko into the museum and make her die in an explosion in this storage room—Ms. Kyoko's unexpectedly quick deductions only made her move the schedule up slightly.

All that's left now is to have the bomb squad and the investigation team withdraw by 8 PM—the museum's closing time—and then, with a bomb that would seem to target the museum, she would…

"..."

How much time is left until the closing time at 8 PM? When I glanced at the clock that had caught my attention earlier, I was struck by a different thought—incidentally, the current time was 6 PM, leaving two hours until the deadline.

Can I reach it?

No, the clock is far out of reach, so there's no way I can touch it, and even if I could, it wouldn't make a difference—what I'm talking about is the smartphone that Assistant Officer Tobirai confiscated, which was placed on the storage shelf that came into view when I looked at the clock.

Of course, I can't reach that either. There's no way she would have placed it somewhere I could reach—but even if I can't reach the phone itself, maybe, just maybe, my toes could graze the edge of the shelf it's on.

I tried stretching out my leg.

For once, this unwieldy, oversized body that I've always felt was too big for me made me wish with all my heart that I were ten centimeters taller—and as it turned out...

I couldn't quite reach with both feet, but my right foot, not just the tip of my toe but even my heel, managed to make contact with the shelf—it was an incredibly awkward position, like some kind of extreme mat exercise, but I managed to reach.

Thank you, Mom and Dad.

I've never been so grateful to my parents.

Kicking the shelf repeatedly, I thought to myself that perhaps my hunched back, which has never been something to be proud of, was working in my favor for once—Assistant Officer Tobirai determined her opponent's height from the position of their voice. That was true when she tossed her police ID to Ms. Kyoko and when she threw the handcuffs to me—so maybe she didn't realize just how tall I actually was because of my slouch.

Maybe that's why the amount of sedative she used wasn't enough—Assistant Officer Tobirai might have thought it was sufficient, but the organic solvent-soaked handkerchief wasn't enough to completely knock out someone of my size.

You never know what might come in handy.

As I kept kicking the shelf, I hoped that the smartphone, which was perched on the third tier, would fall to the floor—or that when it did, it would roll to a place where I could reach it—but the shelf was surprisingly sturdy. One might even say it was solid.

Had it been bolted down?

Well, it's only natural that the storage shelves, which house valuable artworks, would be secure. It felt like I was kicking a continental shelf; it didn't budge at all. At this point, I started to wonder if Assistant Officer Tobirai had deliberately placed the smartphone in a spot that seemed within reach but wasn't, just to taunt me—and then suddenly, the whole shelf wobbled violently. I was just hoping the vibration would knock the smartphone to the floor, but something must have shifted its center of gravity in the back where I couldn't see, and the entire shelf started to tip over.

Toward me, no less.

Wasn't it supposed to be bolted down!?

The storage shelf, which hadn't budged before, began to collapse all at once, making a tremendous noise as it dumped not just the smartphone but everything it held onto the floor.

Since I was tied to the pillar, I couldn't move out of the way and was nearly crushed beneath it all.

I was about to be crushed to death instead of blown up.

I looked at Ms. Kyoko—still peacefully asleep.

This woman, really...

Even in a situation like this, I couldn't help but feel an urge to laugh—I'll have to give her a piece of my mind later. No matter what, I'll make sure of it. With renewed determination, I began searching for the smartphone. I might not be able to escape the blame for utterly ruining a storage shelf filled with the best of contemporary art, but let's shelve that for now (how ironic).

Where's my smartphone?

It had the phone numbers of all kinds of detectives registered in it, so it was my lifeline, but in this case, it was literally a matter of life and death—and there it was.

It wasn't right at my fingertips, but it was near my thigh—it seemed the screen's glass had cracked like a spiderweb, either from the impact of the fall or because some piece of art had landed directly on it. Seeing that was a nasty shock, but judging by the waiting screen still lit up beneath the cracked glass, it seemed the phone itself was still functioning.

It clearly displayed 'PM 6:05.'

But then, I realized I hadn't thought things through—after all, my hands were tied behind my back with rope, so even if the smartphone was within reach, I wouldn't be able to operate it. Even if I somehow managed to move the phone behind the pillar—maybe by rotating myself around it—it would still be impossible to operate the touch screen without looking at it. If it had buttons, maybe, but the screen is completely smooth—or rather, it isn't smooth anymore since it's now covered in cracks.

If only it were a feature phone!

Even without the gag, I've rarely used the voice recognition feature—what about Ms. Kyoko? She isn't gagged. If I could get her to speak from where she is—but there's no sign of her waking up. If she didn't wake up when the shelf collapsed, she might still be in dreamland when the explosion happens—that might be a small blessing in disguise.

Or maybe she isn't in a deep sleep; perhaps the chemicals are just too strong. In that case, calling her peaceful sleeping face "innocent" sounds more like poetic nonsense.

I've always relied on detectives to save me in a pinch, but this time, I have to return the favor—just this once, I can't ask anyone for help.

Just for today.

Think—what would a master detective do in a situation like this?

A tough, brilliant detective would clear this hurdle with ease—didn't the topic of touchscreens come up somewhere? That's right, it was in the interrogation room. It feels like ages ago now, but it hasn't even been half a day.

Yes, Ms. Kyoko said something very detective-like, about how touch screens can be useful for collecting fingerprints—just like in crime drama shows, where investigators get the suspect to hold a glass to take their fingerprints—didn't she mention something else?

She said there's a way to avoid that.

Was it wearing gloves? Gloves that conduct static electricity—no, that was Officer Yura's comment. Ms. Kyoko only said there's a way to operate it without leaving fingerprints—so maybe she meant there's a way to use a touch screen without touching it with your fingers?

Voice recognition… No, I doubt someone who isn't even familiar with touch screens would know about that. There are computers nowadays that can be operated with just your gaze, but cutting-edge technology like that is far removed from Ms. Kyoko's world.

"…"

Maybe...

I twisted my body—whether this would work or not, I wasn't entirely sure, but theoretically, it should. I wasn't trying to operate it with my voice, meaning my mouth, and I wasn't trying to use my gaze, meaning my eyes—it was my nose.

I touched the cracked smartphone screen with the tip of my nose.

It doesn't leave fingerprints, but it's still skin.

Since I'm not a cow, there's no database cataloging human nose prints at any investigative agency in the world, so it won't help identify the culprit, but in terms of generating static electricity, the nose should work just as well as a fingertip.

Sure enough—it worked.

The sleep screen became active, and it displayed 'Enter Passcode'—it was difficult to enter the passcode with tiny taps of my nose, especially with the screen so close, but dialing an emergency number doesn't require entering a passcode.

I slid the screen. '110.'

I was connected to the police right away.

The operator answered with a calm voice—the contrast in our demeanors somewhat calmed my burning impatience, but of course, being gagged, I couldn't properly explain the situation to the person on the other end.

Come to think of it, with so many police officers just downstairs, calling the operator for help felt strangely out of place. What should I do—if I stay on the line, will they be able to pinpoint my location using the signal and come to rescue us? As I grappled with these questions,

"Um, excuse me."

A nonchalant voice interrupted me from the side.

When I looked over, there she was—Ms. Kyoko, awake at last, had been watching my solitary struggle for who knows how long—literally, she had risen from the floor.

“If I may ask—where are we? And who are you?”

“...”

With her memory of the day’s events, the reasoning, the truth, the culprit, and even today’s date completely gone, Ms. Kyoko (who had woken up feeling refreshed) asked the exact same question the operator had to me (utterly exhausted and drained).

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And so, the Forgetful Detective narrowly escaped her perilous situation, but it wasn’t the end of the story—not everything was resolved, and the situation was far from a happy ending. To list the elements that didn’t go well, the first was that even though Officer Yura and the bomb squad rushed up from downstairs as soon as they received the call from headquarters, despite their thorough search, no time bomb was found in the storage room.

Ms. Kyoko’s theory that “the time bomb might be placed in an area where not even authorized personnel are allowed, rather than in the exhibition area or the restricted area,” unfortunately turned out to be incorrect—as much as the thought of being locked up with a bomb drove me to panic, when I think back on it, Assistant Officer Tobirai never actually said there was a time bomb in the storage room.

She had merely skillfully played along with Ms. Kyoko’s ultimately misguided deduction. It just so happened that the storage room was one of the candidate locations for confining Ms. Kyoko. If that was a misunderstanding on Ms. Kyoko’s part, Assistant Officer Tobirai must have been quite pleased with herself—but the matter of Assistant Officer Tobirai, or rather, ‘QRETA 9010,’ remained entirely unresolved.

In a mystery novel, once the culprit’s identity is revealed, that’s usually where things wrap up neatly. But after locking Ms. Kyoko and me in the storage room, she had vanished from the museum. She had carefully locked the shutters and reported to her superior that “the storage room is all clear” (which was technically true), handed over the two dogs to Officer Haraki, and then casually strolled out of the museum as if she were just popping out to a nearby convenience store.

Officer Haraki, who never dreamed that he had been framed as ‘9010,’ thought to himself, “She probably won’t go far if she’s leaving her two precious dogs behind,” but in reality, this was the true culprit’s escape.

Perhaps she had partially achieved her goal of exacting revenge on Ms. Kyoko, or maybe it was a precaution in case we were rescued. Either way, she left the museum and became unreachable by radio or cellphone.

I thought that without Manicure, or especially without Extension, she wouldn't be able to get far, but I was told that as long as she's walking on paved roads, it wouldn't be much of an issue—now that I think about it, she did say something like that.

What she can't see is the light, not the shadows.

Looking back, that was the key to the trick she pulled off in the multi-story parking lot, using the shadows cast by the cars.

She had made off with the two dogs as collateral, slipping away right under our noses.

Honestly, if she hadn't done that, no one would have believed my obviously suspicious testimony—none of the bomb squad members, nor the detectives led by Officer Yura, nor even the forensics team, believed that "Assistant Officer Tobirai would ever do such a thing."

Some even treated me, tied up as I was, as the suspect—Officer Yura reprimanded them for that (the same Officer Yura who nearly arrested me was now defending me), but in any case, Assistant Officer Tobirai was a police officer with that much trust.

No one suspected her.

Not even the Forgetful Detective, at that point.

So, despite uncovering the identity and motive of '9010,' we still didn't know where the bomb was, nor did we know what the culprit was doing or where she was—the situation remained unresolved, far from a happy ending. And the time left was less than two hours.

It was now 6:10 PM.

Normally, this would be the time to give up. No, this wasn't a matter of time. Ms. Kyoko had walked right into the trap set by Assistant Officer Tobirai, who had invited her onto the stage—no, she had completely failed to see through Assistant Officer Tobirai's scheme, and had even invited her into the museum, despite her being banned from entering.

The bomb that Ms. Kyoko had defused was a fake.

She had declared that the very person wasn't the culprit.

Her deduction that there was a bomb in the storage room was wrong.

Her theory that it was a theft in disguise was also wrong.

She was tricked by the lie that Officer Haraki was "9010" and completely lured away—caught in a cunning trap, put to sleep, and not only her life but also mine, as her client, were put in grave danger.

Even from my perspective as one of her fans, this was a blunder so severe it's hard to find any way to excuse her. Of course, there are explanations for each mishap, but for a detective with any pride, these repeated failures would be reason enough to take down the shingle from the office door that same day. If she were to slink away in defeat, tail between her legs, no one would blame her—some might even consider it the honorable way to acknowledge defeat—normally.

However, Ms. Kyoko is the Forgetful Detective.

Ironically, because "9010" put her to sleep, the memories that could have become a crippling trauma have been completely and utterly erased. The blunders and failures don't shock her in the slightest, and she isn't hurt at all. There's no sign of regret—her mind is a blank slate. Even now, she's sitting in a café, rolling up her sleeves to inspect her arms with a curious expression (she changed back into her clothes once we confirmed she was in good health, having been covered in dust in the storage room).

"I am Kyoko Okitegami. 25 years old.

Director of the Okitegami Detective Agency. White hair, glasses.

My memory resets every day."

She's intently re-reading this profile, written on her bare skin—one of the few, bare-minimum memos kept by a detective who leaves no other records. In other words, the only information she has at the moment is this and nothing more. All the deductions and theories she had up until now have completely vanished from her mind—but still, the detective's spirit hasn't been broken.

The investigation continues. At most, there is one hour and fifty minutes left.

"Ms. Kyoko. Sorry to keep you waiting. Here's the investigation file on the case where Assistant Officer Tobirai lost her sight."

Having temporarily left the two dogs at a nearby pet shop (or rather, using his police ID to convince them to take the dogs), Officer Haraki placed not a stack of papers but his tablet on the table where Ms. Kyoko was sitting—apparently, these days, even investigation files are sent as PDFs.

“Thank you, Officer Haraki. Nice to meet you.”

Ms. Kyoko bowed her head and, without reading the room, excitedly said, “Wow, touchscreens these days sure have come a long way.”

We were back to square one.

If it weren’t for the hint Ms. Kyoko had given me in the interrogation room back then, we would still be tied up in the storage room right now. With a hint of irritation in his voice, Officer Yura, who was sitting with us, addressed her, “Please, Ms. Kyoko.”

“We have no choice but to approach this from a motive standpoint—the bomb isn’t in the storage room. It’s not in the exhibition area, nor in the backroom—and of course, it’s not in this café either. To pinpoint the location of the planted bomb, we have to get inside the mind of ‘90...’—Assistant Officer Tobirai.”

His irritation likely stemmed from the fact that he had to pursue a colleague he once trusted—a frustration directed at himself.

“Hmm,” replied Ms. Kyoko in a disinterested tone, showing no empathy at all.

To her, who had just woken up, Assistant Officer Tobirai was ‘someone she’d never met, someone she didn’t know’—so she had none of the psychological conflict that Officer Yura, the bomb squad members, or I were dealing with.

Ordinarily, this mental detachment would be Ms. Kyoko’s greatest advantage, allowing her to perform at her best, but if the very reason she’s able to be a Forgetful Detective is directly tied to the motive behind the crime...

Ms. Kyoko and Assistant Officer Tobirai once worked on an investigation together, and during that case, Assistant Officer Tobirai lost her sight—because of Ms. Kyoko? A grudge held by someone who was harmed due to the mistake of a brilliant detective—or rather, not because of the mistake itself, but because she couldn’t forgive a detective who could forget even a mistake like that—such was the motive.

At the time, when I first heard it in that desperate situation, I was forcibly convinced by it and didn’t question it much, but thinking about it again, it seems strange.

If revenge was the goal, then directly blowing up the Okitegami Detective Agency would have been more straightforward—although it’s a brutal assumption, it would be more certain. Why involve an unrelated museum in such a scheme? If the goal was revenge against an individual, isn’t this all a bit too much? While there were no casualties, there very well could have been, and the property damage was enormous.

And this all happened years ago.

Not in the sense that it’s past the statute of limitations, but why did Assistant Officer Tobirai choose now, at this particular moment, to take revenge on the Forgetful Detective? To find the key to answering that question, we must look into the past. Even if Ms. Kyoko has forgotten, if it’s a past that Assistant Officer Tobirai couldn’t forget, then...

Perhaps that will not only lead to the location of the bomb but also help us track down her whereabouts.

“The location of the bomb or the location of Assistant Officer Tobirai—at the very least, we have to figure out one of them—if possible, both—in less than two hours. Considering the time needed to defuse the bomb, we might have just over an hour left. In any case, please read through this, Ms. Kyoko. Maybe it will jog your memory.”

“I doubt it,”

Ms. Kyoko shrugged at Inspector Yura, who didn't seem to understand the Forgetful Detective's system at all, but perhaps swayed by his passion, she said, “Well, let’s give it a read. As fast as possible.” She then began speed-reading through the tablet screen.

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The XXXX High School Bombing Incident

June 20, 20XX

Suspect: XXXX (Male, 3rd year, Class 5, Age 17 at the time)

Victims: XXXX (Male, 3rd year, Class 3, Age 18 at the time)

XXXX (Female, 3rd year, Class 2, Age 17 at the time)

XXXX (Female, 3rd year, Class 3, Age 17 at the time)

XXXX (Female, 2nd year, Class 1, Age 17 at the time)

XXXX (Female, 2nd year, Class 1, Age 16 at the time)

XXXX (Male, 1st year, Class 5, Age 15 at the time)

Incident Summary: The head of the science club manufactured bombs on school premises.

Planted makeshift bombs in the desks of students he had conflicts with, regardless of grade, and detonated them one by one.

Ultimately, he was planning to blow up the entire school.

The number of bombs he made was around 300.

This number exceeded the total number of students in the school.

Notes: Most of the bombs were defused before detonation.

The bombs had high lethality, but due to swift investigative action, all victims only sustained minor injuries.

However, one investigator lost their sight while protecting a female student during the investigation.

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...It was an incident I'd never heard of. Maybe it was kept confidential due to the involvement of minors—the investigation file is full of redacted sections. Or perhaps, since the actual damage wasn't that severe (though the affected students certainly needed psychological support), it was deemed not newsworthy. However, given the delicate yet sensational nature of the incident, it's hard to believe it wasn't reported at all—maybe I just wasn't aware of it.

An investigator lost their sight while protecting a female student.

This must be referring to Assistant Officer Tobirai, but just from this passage, it's impossible to tell if it was Ms. Kyoko's fault. And naturally, as I read further, there's no mention of the Forgetful Detective, the Okitegami Detective Agency—not even the "Oki" from Kyoko Okitegami.

The only reason Ms. Kyoko, a private detective, can unofficially assist with police investigations is because she's the Forgetful Detective, and neither her successes nor her failures are ever recorded—so I didn't expect the investigation file to directly mention her connection to Assistant Officer Tobirai, but still, it's disappointing to find absolutely no leads.

"Who was the client? Was it the on-site commander for this case?"

I asked, and Officer Haraki explained, "I contacted them, but they said they weren't the client."

"I'm currently questioning everyone involved in the case at the time, including members of the bomb squad, but so far, no one has come forward claiming to have requested Ms. Kyoko's assistance."

“Well, it was probably a confidential request.”

Ms. Kyoko had finished speed-reading and, though she crossed her arms and appeared to be trying to recall something from that time, gave no indication that she remembered anything.

There’s likely a sentiment among police officers that they shouldn’t rely on so-called “master detectives,” so even if someone did request Ms. Kyoko’s help, they might want to keep it hidden. Especially if they reported the success as their own achievement.

“Or perhaps Assistant Officer Tobirai himself was the client.”

Officer Yura proposed this hypothesis.

It’s possible.

Maybe, from the start, they had a detective-client relationship, just like Ms. Kyoko and I do now. But then, something must have happened—some misunderstanding, some falling out—that led to this irreparable conflict. When I glanced over at Ms. Kyoko, who was still sitting with her arms crossed, I thought I saw a hint of anguish on her face. Was it a side effect of the quick anesthesia? No.

Perhaps, rather than just going through the motions, she was actually trying to remember—knowing full well it was impossible.

I see.

Even though she forgets, this is different from forgetting a mistake in deduction or being fooled by a criminal—if she unwittingly hurt someone, and if that became the spark for this incident, then it’s not something she can simply brush off with, “I’ve forgotten everything, so now I’m fine!”

The fact that she doesn’t remember how things played out only makes it impossible to explain—it was a devil's proof, similar to being falsely accused. If we don’t uncover the connection between Ms. Kyoko and Assistant Officer Tobirai, not just for this case but for her future as a detective, it could cause serious problems.

Feeling uneasy, I grabbed Officer Haraki’s tablet and started reading through the case file again from the beginning—there wasn’t any new information, but I wondered if there was some trace of Ms. Kyoko’s involvement in the investigation process—like the keyword “swift,” for example—that could serve as a clue. I decided to go over everything step by step. Carefully. The incident occurred on June 20, 20XX, the location was—huh? June 20, 20XX?

Wait a minute, isn’t that—

“—Not again! We’ve been deceived again!”

I couldn’t help shouting. I drew the attention of everyone around the table, and even the officers conducting the bomb search nearby, but I couldn’t afford to care—this is unbelievable!

“Um, what’s wrong, Mr. Kakushidate? You said we’ve been deceived—”

In response to Officer Yura’s question, I replied heatedly, unable to suppress my emotions, “There’s no connection whatsoever between Ms. Kyoko and ‘9010’! The motive isn’t revenge!”

Just as Officer Yura’s anger in the storage room was directed at himself, now, for the first time, I felt anger toward Assistant Officer Tobirai. I’ve never been so angry at someone else before. Even when my car was blown up, even when I was tied to a pillar, I wasn’t this furious. I couldn’t manage my anger at all.

“No connection, you say—well, if you only skim the case file, it might look that way. However, the existence of the Forgetful Detective is kept confidential—”

Officer Haraki tried to calm me down, but as a regular at the Okitegami Detective Agency, I didn’t need that kind of explanation.

And it was precisely because I was a regular that—

I could provide testimony.

I could provide an alibi.

“June 20, 20XX! That day, I hired Ms. Kyoko! She helped clear me of false charges of trespassing, embezzlement, and violating the Swords and Firearms Control Law! I remember every detail, from the Forgetful Detective’s outfit that day to the total cost of the commission, including expenses!”

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Another blind spot.

Because the Forgetful Detective strictly adheres to confidentiality and forgets every case she’s handled in the past, it means she could have been involved in any case—leaving room for any to be fabricated. There’s a blank space that can be creatively filled however someone likes.

The devil's proof.

Even if she’s falsely accused of causing someone to lose their sight due to a mistake in her deduction, it’s not easy to deny it—there’s no mention of it in the investigation files or any records, but it can just be explained away as “classified information.” As a result, the

investigative team ends up chasing down a non-existent connection, endlessly searching for something that isn't there—it had all the makings of a dramatic revenge story against the Forgetful Detective.

It was so captivating, you couldn't help but wonder if it was true.

But just like how '9010' tried to make Officer Haraki the fall guy through misdirection, in the end, this too was a fake motive—no matter how thoroughly we pursued that route, we'd never find the bomb.

That was close.

However, even if the Forgetful Detective forgets, for the client, each case is unforgettable—I haven't forgotten a single time Ms. Kyoko has helped me, not once.

No way I'll forget.

If proof is needed, I can even produce the business card Ms. Kyoko handed me with a "Nice to meet you" at the time—meaning, on the day Assistant Officer Tobirai lost her sight, Ms. Kyoko has a solid alibi because she was working on a different case.

This clears Ms. Kyoko of suspicion.

The culprit, who tried to use me, a regular client, to implicate Ms. Kyoko as a cover, ended up being undone by the fact that I'm a regular client and was able to clear her name. This is less a matter of "bad luck" and more like '9010' getting what they deserved.

There was one more thing I was certain of.

Setting up revenge against Ms. Kyoko as a fake motive means that '9010' is trying to conceal the real motive—whether that's a grudge against the museum director, the theft of an exhibit, or some completely different reason, we were back to square one. But at the last minute, we avoided getting stuck in a dead end. By pretending to avenge herself against Ms. Kyoko, what is Assistant Officer Tobirai plotting? If we figure that out, it might give us a clue to the bomb's location.

The current time is 6:30 PM.

We've wasted a lot of time, but we can still fight.

"Mr. Yakusuke,"

just as Officer Yura and Officer Haraki left the café to reconsider their investigative strategy, Ms. Kyoko tugged at my sleeve and called out to me in a small voice.

Mr. Yakusuke?

She had been consistently calling me “Mr. Kakushidate” all day—oh, I see, since her memory has reset, her habits have too.

But it didn’t seem like that was the only reason.

“Thank you for clearing my name of false charges.”

“N-No, it’s something you’ve done for me many times before—”

“I have a private matter I’d like to discuss with you, Mr. Yakusuke. I no longer know who or what I can trust.”

Saying this, Ms. Kyoko held onto my sleeve and began to pull me along—another “private consultation.” But unlike before her memory reset, this time, she had excluded not only Assistant Officer Tobirai but also Officer Yura and Officer Haraki from the group—well, of course, as she said, in this situation, it’s impossible to know what to trust. Even the basic premises are uncertain. And on top of that, Ms. Kyoko has forgotten the relationships she built with the investigative team throughout the day, so to her, Officer Yura and Officer Haraki are just “new acquaintances.”

Yet, amidst all this...

Ms. Kyoko had decided that I was someone she could trust—even though, from her perspective, I was no different from Officer Yura or Officer Haraki, just another “new acquaintance.”

Was it because I provided an alibi? Or because I proved I was a regular client?

“No, no. It’s because you got so angry on my behalf.”

Ms. Kyoko said.

Hearing that made me feel a bit embarrassed about how I’d lost my temper so publicly earlier—because I got angry?

“‘9010’ must have thought that since I forget everything, she could say whatever she wanted—but forgetting the past and having the past rewritten are two entirely different things. If I can’t trust someone like you, Mr. Yakusuke, who understands that so passionately, then who can I trust?”

“…”

In a way, I felt like I was the one being understood—ten minutes after being so furious, I was now on the verge of tears. It was emotional whiplash, but still, this wasn't the time to get sentimental.

Ms. Kyoko led me into the museum's library—a room filled with books on fine arts and culture, lined with bookshelves that created plenty of hidden nooks. It seemed like a perfect place to set a trap, but of course, the area had already been checked for bombs because of that very reason. It seemed that Ms. Kyoko wanted to lead me into one of these "safe hiding spots." After confirming that no one else was in the library, she said,

"I'm not showing you this as a way of thanking you for protecting me, but there's something I'd like you to see, Mr. Yakusuke."

Saying this, she started to unbutton her blouse from the bottom up.

"W-Wait! Please stop, Ms. Kyoko! That's not why I protected you!"

I panicked, but I was completely off the mark. This wasn't what I thought. Ms. Kyoko was unbuttoning the lower half of her blouse to expose her slightly plump belly and show me the words written there.

"architect-9010"

Just like the inscription on the fake bomb's dial, this was written in paint—just like the memo written on the bare skin of her left arm, it was in Ms. Kyoko's handwriting.

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"architect-9010."

When could she have written this?

It was a no-brainer. For the Forgetful Detective, who adheres strictly to confidentiality, writing memos on her bare skin—apart from the minimum profile information on her left arm—is an emergency measure reserved for crisis situations. It's only done when her reasoning process is about to be forcibly reset before the case is solved.

In other words, it must have been written at the very moment Assistant Officer Tobirai knocked her unconscious—just as the culprit could procure an organic solvent from anywhere, the detective could easily find something to write with anywhere in the museum.

This was a sort of dying message left just before her memory was lost. It's proof that, even when deceived, drugged, and confined, the Forgetful Detective managed to strike back at the last moment—proof that she wasn't completely defeated.

The reasoning, the detective work—all of it hadn't been entirely reset. It's likely that Ms. Kyoko found this dying message from her "yesterday self" while checking her condition after waking up or simply while changing clothes. But, being cautious, she had kept it to herself until now, not consulting anyone.

"architect-9010"?

What does it mean? She must have decided that keeping it to herself wouldn't solve anything and has now come to me, the one person she "can trust," for a "private consultation."

"Yes. I wanted to ask if you could tell me anything. Before my memory reset, did I mention anything about a message like this?"

"No—"

I said, while staring intently at the letters.

It felt inappropriate, like I was staring at Ms. Kyoko's stomach, but this wasn't the time to be concerned about that. From what little I could deduce with my amateur knowledge, this probably resembles the username from the posted video, "curator-9010," right? A curator is a museum director, so "QRETA 9010"... yet "architect," what was that again? An artist… no, no, that's not it.

Architect.

"Yes. An architect is a 'builder,' isn't it?"

"A builder—"

The word "architect" didn't resonate with me at all, but hearing "builder", it triggered my memory—I felt like I'd heard it somewhere before. Felt like? I can't afford to say something so uncertain. As the Forgetful Detective's external memory device, I absolutely have to remember—yes, I heard it just before I was confined. Assistant Officer Tobirai mentioned that the reason she got into bomb disposal was because of her father's work—she said she was influenced by watching him.

Her father's work—construction.

"That's it!"

In a rare breach of etiquette, Ms. Kyoko raised her voice in the library. Well, after boldly unbuttoning her blouse, it's not like she was exactly the picture of ladylike decorum right now—and anyway, there wasn't a single person in the room, not even a librarian—'that's it'?

What about construction?

"I need to confirm something, Mr. Yakusuke. Was the father who had such a strong influence on '9010' involved in the construction industry?"

"Yes. She mentioned something about using explosives at construction sites—what was it again? Her father used explosives in demolition work, and that's what led her to take up bomb disposal as a profession, or something like that—"

It's not an exact quote, but that was the gist of it… but so what? How Assistant Officer Tobirai ended up in bomb disposal was just small talk, wasn't it?

"Why she ended up in bomb disposal may not be important—but why she planted bombs in this museum is extremely important."

Well, yes, that's crucial at this point. It's the most important thing. If neither the exhibits nor the famous museum director were the targets—and if the detective wasn't the target either—then what is '9010's true goal?

"We knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

Ms. Kyoko said—it was slightly different from her usual line. She said "we," meaning it should have been obvious to everyone.

"After all, the culprit has been saying it from the start. The target is the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art—not the owner, not the artists, not the visitors. 'QRETA 9010' wasn't targeting it as a curator, but as an architect."

She was aiming to destroy the building itself.

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She was targeting the building itself.

This case has been full of blind spots, but this was by far the biggest—they were so massive that they were almost invisible. When you hear that a museum is being targeted, you naturally assume it's the exhibits inside that are the target. Whether directly or indirectly, literally or metaphorically, you think it's the contents of the box that are going to be blown up.

If the target were a single piece of art, it would seem excessive to use a bomb—similarly, if the target were just Ms. Kyoko, the collateral damage would be far too great. But this assumption neatly answers those doubts—it wasn't excessive, nor was it collateral damage.

If the museum building itself was the target, the container rather than the contents.

…Up until now, '9010's crime plans haven't exactly gone off without a hitch—there have been numerous miscalculations and errors. Of course, she never expected everything to go perfectly from the start, so she's been adjusting their plans on the fly, managing to stay on course with impressive flexibility—but this time, it's different.

For the first time, 'QRETA 9010' made a mistake.

She leaked information she shouldn't have to the detective—at that moment, Assistant Officer Tobirai should have focused on leading Ms. Kyoko to the storage room without arousing suspicion—she needed to keep the conversation going to bide time, to distract her.

Or maybe she was just overconfident, thinking she could wipe the detective's memory clean afterwards—whatever the case, leaking that "motivation" was '9010's slip-up, and it gave us our first real clue.

Finally, after countless false starts, our reasoning has taken a step forward. And for the fastest detective, the first step is made at full speed.

I finally took my eyes off Ms. Kyoko's stomach and looked at my watch—it was almost 7 PM. Just as a faint glimmer of hope began to appear, the remaining time was now about to drop below an hour—considering the time needed for bomb disposal and for the evacuation of the investigation team (and us), we were pretty much out of time.

But we can't stop here.

The anger I feel towards Assistant Officer Tobirai is still burning fiercely inside me. Fabricating memories of someone who forgot them—like saying "I was so close to the deceased when they were alive"—I can't forgive Assistant Officer Tobirai for so brazenly pulling off something like that.

"Let's ask Officer Yura to investigate the connection between this building and Assistant Officer Tobirai."

They were probably already looking into things like the exhibits and any connection to Director Machimura, but now we should prioritize an approach that views the museum not as a museum, but purely as a building.

Thinking that, I suggested we leave the library, but Ms. Kyoko stopped me, saying, “Please wait, Mr. Yakusuke.” What could it be? Does she still not fully trust Officer Yura? But at this point, we can't avoid relying on the police entirely...

“I understand. But before that, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I wondered if she was going to thank me again for the alibi testimony earlier—though, considering how many times Ms. Kyoko has cleared my name in the past, it’s hardly something that even begins to repay her.

But that wasn’t it. Lowering her voice, Ms. Kyoko said, “Please be sure to keep it a secret that the writing on my stomach I showed you earlier served as a hint.” To my surprise, the usually composed Ms. Kyoko blushed slightly.

“I think my waistline is normally a bit slimmer, although I can't remember it well. It shouldn’t look like this.”

“…”

If that’s the reason she confided in me, then she’s quite the ladylike detective indeed.

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Now that we had enjoyed the detective’s unique deduction, it was time to showcase the police’s exceptional investigative skills. Using the new lead provided by the Forgetful Detective, Officer Yura’s team took only five minutes to uncover the connection between Assistant Officer Tobirai and the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art. Once they noticed it, it was something so simple that it made sense why ‘9010’ went to such lengths to conceal it.

I had vaguely guessed that Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father’s company might have built this museum, but in reality, it was the opposite—her father’s company failed to win the bid to build this museum.

“It seems they lost in what’s known as a competition. It was a project that could make or break the company, and Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father, who was in charge of the design—a licensed architect—was also the project manager. So, when the project fell through, he was the one held responsible. Well, while the designer’s cost and various other factors weren’t the only reasons, in the end, he had to resign.”

'He’s retired now'—

“I’ve heard he was once a diligent employee, but after losing his job, he spent most of his time at home, drowning his sorrows. Assistant Officer Tobirai spent much of her teenage years watching her father like that. It even got to the point where he became violent, which eventually

led to her parents' divorce. Now, Assistant Officer Tobirai is the one supporting him. But apparently, she has been practically supporting him since her college days."

'Living a leisurely life'—

The image is completely different, and the meaning of being a "daddy's girl" changes drastically. But in this case, Assistant Officer Tobirai hardly told any lies. She must have realized she'd let something slip and quickly changed the subject—but while I'm impressed by the police's internal auditing skills, it's still quite intrusive to delve so deeply into someone's family affairs.

I was more curious about the methods they used to gather so much information in such a short time than about their capabilities. Officer Yura explained, "It was already clear that there was a source of information from within."

"We looked into Assistant Officer Tobirai's friendships—sure enough, we found a friend who had been informing her of the investigation's progress within the police station. The friend wasn't aware of it, and if asked by an officer in charge of bomb disposal, there wouldn't have been any reason not to share information about inviting you to the station, or about Ms. Kyoko's arrival and departure."

While the polite phrasing of "inviting" me was debatable, we now understood why the culprit knew the internal police code '9010'—well, in her position, it was information she would have eventually learned.

It seems that this friend, unknowingly involved in the crime, was the primary source of information to Assistant Officer Tobirai. One might think the friend would be reluctant to reveal such personal details, but perhaps they were outraged at being made an accomplice without their knowledge. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

Of course, the friend felt a sense of righteous indignation as a police officer, but at the same time, they also felt sympathy for their friend.

"Please arrest her. Please stop her."

They reportedly pleaded.

"I'll tell you everything I know—whatever punishment I deserve for my carelessness, I'll accept. Just don't let Azanny commit any more crimes. She's not doing this because she wants to."

"She's not doing this because she wants to" wouldn't fly after causing such a serious incident. Even in this situation, knowing that she has a friend who would say something like that, I found it even harder to forgive Assistant Officer Tobirai for turning to crime. But I also have to admit that this appeal cooled my anger a little.

“Please, someone stop me.”

Hurry up and stop me.

Ms. Kyoko speculated that the final words of the video were not a taunt but a genuine plea. If so, it might have been more of a request for help from the detective than an SOS. Assistant Officer Tobirai had no real grudge against the Forgetful Detective, but if there was another reason she chose Ms. Kyoko as a decoy beyond the fact that she could fabricate memories, it might have been because Ms. Kyoko is the fastest detective.

Aside from the information provided by the friend, there was another newly discovered fact—something that came from Officer Yura’s insight, even Ms. Kyoko hadn’t anticipated this.

The multi-story parking garage that was first bombed—the scene of the demonstration that almost got me framed and led to my “invitation” to the police station. The person who drew up the plans for that building was none other than Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father—it was a job that his company had been contracted to do.

Normally, no one cares who drew up the plans for a parking garage—but we should never forget that if a building stands somewhere, there was someone who built it. In the documents preserved by the construction company, the name written in the tiny “design supervisor” column was indeed that of Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father.

That information left me confused.

Targeting the museum that marked the start of her father’s downfall makes sense, but going after his work as well—if it were one or the other, I could understand. If she resented her violent, alcoholic father so much that she wanted to ruin his work, I could understand—but wouldn’t she choose just one?

“I think Azanny wanted to prove how remarkable her father’s work really was.”

That’s what I believe her motive was.

The friend reportedly said.

“I also read the investigation files. When I saw the condition of the multi-story parking garage that was damaged by the bomb, I realized—yes, most of the cars parked there were ruined. The gasoline caught fire, and the entire structure was engulfed in flames—it was a shocking video. But the sprinklers activated immediately, and the fire was extinguished, wasn’t it? On the surface, it was scorched black, but the parking garage itself didn’t collapse or even have holes in it.”

Officer Yura also thought, after entering the site for inspection, that if they removed the damaged cars, the garage could probably reopen for business the very next day—the design.

The architect who drew up the plans.

A structure that could withstand both fire and earthquakes.

When people saw the parking garage in its original state in that video, everyone probably thought it was “just an ordinary parking garage”—a plain, boring, unremarkable building.

But—its design was actually quite ingenious.

Not just in emergencies, but in everyday use as well. As someone who used that parking garage for work, I could attest that it was undoubtedly user-friendly... in contrast, how about this museum?

The building that won the competition in which Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father’s design was rejected—this building is far from being convenient. The hallways are winding, filled with unnecessary stairs and ups and downs, and the back areas are completely inefficient. Even retracing your steps is a challenge. The fact that the storage room is on the second floor is also baffling. Of course, as a museum, the complexity might have been a deliberate choice, but in an emergency, it’s a dangerously impractical layout.

For instance, take the current case.

“Well, there may have been a decision made in favor of it ‘as an art museum’—but there might have been some corruption involved as well.”

This was a wild guess from Ms. Kyoko, but it’s not impossible, right? Even if it wasn’t outright corruption, given that the building was to be an art museum, a considerable amount of subsidy money would have been involved as a cultural project. There might have been connections, bribes, or other shady dealings.

Naturally, Officer Yura tried to contact Assistant Officer Tobirai’s father himself. It seems he managed to get through on the phone, but the man was too drunk to hold any coherent conversation—he reportedly kept repeating in a slurred voice, “I’m already dead. I’m dead. Dead.”

“Because the video was titled ‘Demonstration,’ I automatically thought of the parking garage explosion as a ‘trailer’ and the museum explosion as the ‘main feature,’ but in reality, it was more like a ‘Part One/Part Two’ scenario.”

For some reason, Ms. Kyoko expressed it in movie terms.

“A comparative experiment. Detonate both with ‘bombs of the same scale’ and conduct a real-world test to see which structure is superior—make it known to the world. Could that be Assistant Officer Tobirai’s motive? As the daughter of an architect?”

Whether it was hatred toward artists, revenge against Director Machimura, theft of the exhibits, or even revenge against the Forgetful Detective—blowing up the museum seemed excessive for any of those reasons. Burning down the parking garage just for a ‘trailer’ had also struck me as overly elaborate and grandiose. But if the very act of blowing up both the parking garage and the museum was the objective, then it wasn’t excessive or grandiose at all—it was perfectly fitting.

“If the incident had ended according to the ‘9010’ blueprint—if both the parking garage, which remained standing despite being hit by a ‘bomb of the same scale,’ and the museum, reduced to rubble, had appeared in the same newspaper, it would’ve been obvious which was the superior building from just two photographs.”

Unwavering, single-minded in her pursuit of the goal—Assistant Officer Tobirai was racing toward it. And the last remaining question about her motive was answered by Officer Haraki. He’s not Director Machimura’s younger brother, not at all—in fact, he has three younger sisters, and he was the one to solve the mystery of: why now?

If the goal was to restore her father’s honor—if that’s what we could even call it—why did Assistant Officer Tobirai choose to act at this particular time?

You can’t just say, “But that was nearly twenty years ago”—because even now, Assistant Officer Tobirai lives with her drunken father, listening to his daily grumbling. But why did she finally snap, here and now? Was there some kind of trigger?

“Apparently, it’s cancer. They say there's not much time left.'"”

Officer Haraki said this with a solemn expression.

Cancer? Not much time left?

So, to clear away any regrets, she wanted to release her pent-up frustration before he died? I can sympathize with that, but that’s so selfish—

“No, it’s not Assistant Officer Tobirai who has cancer.”

“...? Then, is it her father?”

Since he’s been drinking heavily for over twenty years, it wouldn’t be surprising if his organs weren’t in the best condition, or so I thought, but Officer Haraki shook his head at this too.

“The one with cancer is the service dog, Extension. I just got a call from the pet shop owner—the owner is apparently a licensed veterinarian. Suspecting something was wrong with Extension, the vet examined him and found tumors in both eyes.”

They’ve metastasized all over.

It seems the dog is likely almost completely blind by now.

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Given that Officer Haraki seemed uneasy around dogs, Assistant Officer Tobirai might have figured that he wouldn’t notice anything when she handed the two dogs over to him before making her escape—but while Officer Haraki wasn't particularly fond of animals, he wasn't cruel to them either.

Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to properly care for them because of the ongoing investigation, Officer Haraki didn’t just pick any random shop near the museum. Instead, he used the internet to carefully search for a highly-rated pet shop owned by a vet, one that not only provided grooming services but also, if necessary, hosted pet ceremonies like weddings and funerals. Thanks to his overly thorough choice, Extension’s illness was discovered.

Normally, a guide dog that has completed its service would be adopted by a new family and live out its days in peace—but Assistant Officer Tobirai didn’t let go of Extension, even when he was no longer able to work as a guide dog.

She didn’t want to be apart from him.

She became his adoptive owner herself.

Though it looked like she was being led by a guide dog, in reality, it was more like they were just taking walks together—a case of pet loss, perhaps?

How ironic that Director Machimura’s rigid stance turned out to be dead on—no pets allowed. No. In the sense of a companion animal, Extension was still a service dog.

If she saw Extension as a source of solace in her not-so-happy cohabitation with her father, and now this service dog was about to die from tumors in its eyes—it’s no wonder she fell into despair.

She might have even thought it would be better if she were the one with cancer—Manicure was a police dog, after all. Danger was part of the job. But a service dog was different. Extension was a part of Assistant Officer Tobirai.

She was losing her sight for the second time.

The grief from that loss, the emotions she had suppressed for twenty years, finally exploded—no, that's not right.

It was probably quieter than that.

It was more like a fragile thread snapping—Assistant Officer Tobirai had likely reached her limit long ago and was just waiting for an excuse. In that sense, the reason, the motive, could have been anything.

It wasn't that she thought, "I can't take it anymore."

It was more like, "I'm done."

"Continuing to work in the dangerous bomb disposal unit even after losing her sight might have been a form of death wish."

Officer Haraki's analysis of her deeper psychology was a bit intrusive, but if that's the case, then the fact that she became the ace in her field is almost comical.

Considering the facts and hypotheses collectively, the situation has taken a sudden turn for the worse—given that Extension was almost completely blind, and Assistant Officer Tobirai was still walking around with him, it means they had been spending their remaining time together. At the same time, you could say that Assistant Officer Tobirai was acting as Extension's guide dog.

Strictly speaking, in reality, Assistant Officer Tobirai and Extension were probably complementing each other's vision, but this means that Assistant Officer Tobirai was far more accustomed to going out without Extension than we had assumed, making it even harder to track her down now that she's disappeared.

In fact, she might have already quietly ended her life somewhere far away, having done everything she wanted to do.

Less than an hour remains—at this point, '9010' isn't even trying to hide her identity anymore.

She's not even trying to stay alive anymore.

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"It seems Assistant Officer Tobirai never intended to keep her identity hidden forever—and as for her true motive, it was enough if she could keep it concealed until the announced time of 8 PM She never intended to blow us two up, Mr. Yakusuke."

Even though the case's background had become as clear as it could possibly get, the oppressive atmosphere that loomed over the museum didn't lift—partly for emotional reasons, but also because, even though we now understood the ideological background of 'QRETA 9010,' it didn't help narrow down the search area for the explosives.

In fact, considering that the entire museum was a target, there was even the possibility she had scattered the bombs around, placing multiple explosives everywhere. Considering how little time we had left, this was a fatal possibility.

In the end, we decided to continue the search until 7:45—only thirty minutes remained before we would call off the search. Naturally, Ms. Kyoko and I joined in. It was a free-for-all search, with no specific areas assigned.

A dragnet operation. A hit-or-miss approach.

"She didn't intend to blow us up? Well, I'm not so sure about that—"

"But she left a smartphone within your reach—or rather, within reach of your foot? And the anesthesia dosage wasn't enough. If she was serious about killing us, it feels like she was holding back a bit."

Come to think of it, she was right. After all, Ms. Kyoko did wake up before 8:00 PM—so it's certainly possible to interpret that the whole point was just to confuse the investigation team with a fake motive of "revenge against the Forgetful Detective" until then.

"Well, ultimately, it was sloppy enough that it wouldn't have mattered if it all went up in smoke—maybe she even noticed that I had written a memo on my abdomen."

So, if things had gone according to the "9010" blueprint, it would have played out with Ms. Kyoko waking up from the anesthesia, unable to do anything on her own, and would have instructed me to call for help on my smartphone…?

"If it weren't for the time you managed to buy by thinking on your feet, we'd probably have been fumbling around trying to dig into my past, only to go 'boom!' in the meantime."

That nonchalant sound effect didn't quite do the situation justice.

But even the small amount of time we gained is now like a flickering candle—there's nothing in the exhibit area, nothing in the backroom, nothing in the storage room, nothing in the café, nothing in the library. It's starting to feel like maybe there isn't a bomb at all.

"It's best to abandon that wishful thinking—perhaps Assistant Officer Tobirai is ultimately hoping that her true motive will become widely known. Otherwise, there's no guarantee that the public would compare the damage to both the parking garage and the art museum."

“So then, the main reason for creating the warning video was really just what you mentioned at the start—to create a time lag for evacuation so that no one would get hurt?”

“And to attract public attention by making it a sensational, theatrical crime. Although, it seems it wasn’t all that successful—the view count on that video you showed me earlier had dropped to ninth place.”

Controlling the view count wasn’t something that could be engineered according to plan. Still, if someone among the onlookers, who would likely gather again, were to upload footage of the museum exploding, it would probably hold the top spot for at least half a day.

The goal of capturing public attention would be fully achieved.

If that’s the case, then thinking that Assistant Officer Tobirai might have already committed suicide seems overly sentimental. In fact, she might even turn herself in after achieving her goal and then use the trial to passionately argue her misfortunes or her justification—

“Ms. Kyoko!”

As it was nearing 7:30 PM, with thirty minutes until the explosion and less than fifteen minutes until the evacuation, Officer Yura came running over—he looked drenched in sweat, as if he had been running around all over the place, probably not because he was trying to act like the fastest detective.

“Oh my, what’s the matter, Officer Yura? Did you perhaps stumble upon the bomb unexpectedly?”

In contrast, Ms. Kyoko remained calm and composed, but even she couldn’t hide her surprise when Officer Yura, having sprinted over, delivered the completely unexpected news, causing her gentle expression to harden.

“There—there was a phone call at the station—from Assistant Officer Tobirai!”

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The last time “QRETA 9010” intended to contact her friend at the police station was because there happened to be a public phone along the route she was taking. She was surprised that such a thing still existed, but that shadow unmistakably belonged to a public phone. It’s fair to say it was exactly the kind of situation where a public phone would be needed.

Considering that she shouldn’t involve anyone else any further and that the plan wasn’t fully executed yet, it was clearly unnecessary to do anything more. (That’s why she had already

disposed of her cell phone and radio during the journey.) However, she couldn't bring herself to leave without speaking to her friend one last time.

Maybe her mental state was weakened by the fact that she had moved around for just an hour or so without Extension—after all, it was impossible for her to live without Extension. There was also a very practical reason to check on any flaws in the plan that might have arisen due to last-minute changes.

If the Forgetful Detective and Yakusuke Kakushidate, who were locked in the storage room, hadn't been rescued yet, she would have to take action. That would mean "9010's" identity hadn't been revealed yet, and Assistant Officer Tobirai would just be thought of as being late coming home. But that scenario would be problematic.

She had been so obsessed with concealing her motive until now, but at 8 PM, the information would be released—however, this concern turned out to be unnecessary.

Unnecessary, or maybe just an excuse.

After all, there was no way the Forgetful Detective couldn't have escaped from such a minor predicament—apparently, she escaped far quicker than the assistant officer anticipated—in fact, according to her friend on the other end of the line, Assistant Officer Tobirai's background had already been completely uncovered.

As expected of the master detective.

Maybe it was a mistake to have let slip her reason for joining the bomb disposal team—or perhaps it was when she administered the anesthesia, and Kyoko seemed to be doing something with her abdomen—was that motion related to it? Still, Tobirai thought that the plausible motive of "revenge against the Forgetful Detective" would serve as a misdirection for at least a few hours—or maybe the detective had an alibi for the day of the incident? But the Forgetful Detective shouldn't have been able to establish an alibi… Assistant Officer Tobirai had no idea. What happened? How did she clear herself of that dishonorable accusation?

In any case, it seems leaving the museum quickly was the right call—even though it was an action without solid reasoning, her "detective's intuition," honed over nearly ten years in the bomb disposal unit, barely managed to dodge the detective's deductions.

Anyway, her friend at the police station frankly apologized for revealing the details of Tobirai's family situation when questioned by Officer Yura, the investigation's lead—though it was Tobirai who should have been apologizing. Yet, she felt no inclination whatsoever to respond to the pleas for surrender or to reveal the location of the bomb—not at all, which surprised her. She had been hesitant to make the call, worried that her resolve might waver, but that concern turned out to be completely unfounded.

'It seems my heart has stopped functioning long ago.'

If the person trying to persuade her now were her father, would her heart have been moved, even a little? Either way, it was an impossible fantasy. By now, he was probably drunk and in no condition to make a call—after all, there was no one to stop “QRETA 9010.”

“Please tell us where the bomb is, Assistant Officer Tobirai.”

At that moment, just as she decided she should hang up the phone before they could trace the call, the voice on the other end suddenly changed from that of her friend to someone else.

“If you don’t tell us, we’ll kill your dogs.”

Even Assistant Officer Tobirai, who had always been good at recognizing voices, couldn’t immediately identify the speaker, even though it was a voice she should have recognized—such was the harshness in that tone.

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“We’ll kill your dogs.”

Everyone in the café at that moment, including myself, froze at the words, which were so unlike Ms. Kyoko—but the reason we froze wasn’t the cruel words themselves. It was because we were faced with the sight of the Forgetful Detective, who looked paler than I’d ever seen her, as if she was about to burst into tears, with an expression of anguish so raw and unguarded that it was as if she had just uttered something terribly unclean, something utterly unforgivable.

If she had said it with her usual cheerful smile, or even with the ruthlessly stern expression of a cold-blooded detective, it might have been more bearable—but I had a feeling that this memory wouldn’t be something that could be reset after just one night’s sleep.

But Ms. Kyoko had no choice.

To get Assistant Officer Tobirai to reveal the location of the bomb, after she had refused to listen to her friend’s persuasion, this was the only option left—however, a police officer couldn’t make such an inappropriate threat. Especially not to a colleague she had just been working alongside, someone she had gone through life-and-death situations with. Trying to calm her down was one thing, but threatening her would be too hollow to be convincing—even if I could have taken her place, I wouldn’t have been able to do it—I still felt anger at being deceived and restrained, but I couldn’t help but feel a certain fondness toward her personality. So this was a negotiation that only Ms. Kyoko, who had forgotten everything about her, who was a “stranger,” could do.

Using a mix of digital and analog methods, the call that apparently came from a public phone to the friend at the station was put on speakerphone, and then connected in video call mode to

another smartphone, which in turn was linked to Officer Haraki's tablet. It was through this setup that the negotiation with Assistant Officer Tobirai, who had been conversing with her friend, was forcibly interrupted.

By any measure, this was the last chance—Ms. Kyoko, who looked as if she might collapse at any moment, was being watched anxiously by me and the entire investigation team, none of us able to do anything to support her.

And then.

"Guh—hahahah. I almost fell for it."

Assistant Officer Tobirai's response was a mocking laugh.

"My heart did waver. If you had said it in your usual tone, I might have buckled under the threat. For a moment, I couldn't even tell who it was—when you try so hard to sound threatening, it's obvious that it's just a bluff, Ms. Kyoko."

"...I'll do it if I say I will."

Ms. Kyoko persisted, but Assistant Officer Tobirai was completely unfazed, replying, "Go right ahead, if you can."

The negotiation failed. She had seen the bluff for what it was.

"But I'm truly impressed, Ms. Kyoko. As you already know, I involved you because I needed a fake motive that could buy me a few hours... But I've never actually hated anyone in my life."

"…"

"Even the person who made the bomb that caused me to go blind—I don't hold the slightest grudge against them. I just don't understand the concept of hating someone. That's why I had to just make someone up. Someone forgetful who would be hated even if they had nothing to do with it—that was the only criteria for my choice. But I did enjoy working together with you."

Perhaps feeling confident in her victory, Assistant Officer Tobirai began to talk more freely, to which Ms. Kyoko responded weakly,

"—I don't remember anymore."

"That's right, I reset that memory. Nice to meet you, Ms. Kyoko."

With that line, she stole Ms. Kyoko's trademark phrase.

“It was a fabricated grudge, but now I almost wish that lie had been true, Ms. Kyoko. This isn’t a lie—I really would have liked to work on a case with you, under different circumstances.”

Even though she said it wasn’t a lie, after so many falsehoods, it was impossible to know what her true feelings were—perhaps even she no longer knew.

“You can.”

Ms. Kyoko didn’t stay silent.

Even in a situation where she seemed utterly defeated, even after hearing words that could be interpreted as being taunted by the victor, she continued.

“If you turn yourself in right now, I’ll forget your crimes, even if no one else forgives you. In our next ‘Nice to meet you,’ we can be a fun, mismatched detective duo. Let’s make a buddy story together.”

“…”

“So please, I’m begging you. There’s still time. Tell us where the bomb is.”

What master detective would plead with the criminal?

Some might say it was unheard of.

But on this day, Ms. Kyoko was more of a detective than any other detective I’ve known—more herself than on any other day.

“You’ve bested me, Ms. Kyoko.”

After a moment of silence, Assistant Officer Tobirai responded to her plea.

“There actually isn’t a bomb in the museum. It was all just a funny little joke of mine. Feel better now? Then, please evacuate as quickly as possible. You won’t make it in time otherwise. The time is now 7:45 PM. Beep-beep-beep.”

The call abruptly ended.

41

The location of the public phone was identified—not as far away as feared, but not close enough to reach in time either. It was a public phone at a subway station about three stops away, and even on an express train, it would take more than fifteen minutes to get there. Naturally, Assistant Officer Tobirai would have left the scene immediately after hanging up.

Officer Yura, Officer Haraki, and the rest of the investigation team, along with the bomb disposal unit who had been betrayed by their former colleague, finally began preparations to withdraw—more like a retreat than an evacuation.

Except for Ms. Kyoko.

Ms. Kyoko was still slumped over in her seat at the café—frozen in the position she had been in when the call ended, not moving an inch. She hung her head, muttering to herself, looking far from the image of a graceful loser.

Even a memory reset wouldn't work now.

With only fifteen minutes left, by the time she took a nap and woke up, the museum would have already been reduced to rubble, along with the memory of her defeat carved into her mind—even if she woke up in just one minute, explaining the situation would eat up all the remaining time.

In reality, the time limit had already passed.

I didn't know what to say, but someone had to say something—and that someone was me.

“Ms. Kyoko. I understand how you feel, but we have to go. If we don’t leave soon, we won’t be able to get out in time—the path to the exit is winding, we can't go in a straight line.”

It was true that the complex design had bothered Assistant Officer Tobirai—it lacking accessibility was a contrast with her father’s simple architectural philosophy. In hindsight, the reason she was so efficient in blowing up the parking structure was because she had thoroughly studied her father’s design—the positions of the security cameras, the parking spaces, and the angles of the view were all perfectly ingrained in her mind.

Minimal force, maximum effect—damn it.

That’s just basic construction site logic.

“We may not be able to save the museum or the exhibits, but if we evacuate now, at least there won’t be any casualties—let’s do what we can to reduce Assistant Officer Tobirai’s charges.”

It was a cowardly argument, on par with the threat Ms. Kyoko had used, but if I didn’t say something like this, she might not move—whether Ms. Kyoko heard me or not was unclear, but it seemed to have some effect, as she slowly stood up, in a manner that didn’t resemble the fastest detective at all.

She was unsteady on her feet, stumbling slightly, so I moved closer to support her—ready to catch her if she fell. As I got closer, I could faintly hear the muttering that hadn't stopped since she hung up the phone—Ms. Kyoko was saying something like this:

"What if she really didn't plant a bomb in the art museum?—But she said we should evacuate—It doesn't add up—"

"..."

How heartbreaking. Despite Assistant Officer Tobirai's parting words, which seemed to mock the sincerity Ms. Kyoko had shown, she was still analyzing them, trying to use them as clues for her deduction—it was like counting the age of a child who had passed away. I almost thought it might be faster to just carry her out of there, but I couldn't bring myself to interrupt her desperate reasoning by urging her to hurry.

So I did my best to go along with her.

"Y-Yeah. Maybe Assistant Officer Tobirai really didn't plant a bomb. If that's the case, it makes sense that we couldn't find it after all this searching—maybe she was just pretending to look for it, planning to plant it at the last minute? But your deduction was so quick, Ms. Kyoko, that she had to flee before she could set it up—"

No, that doesn't work. That doesn't resolve the contradiction. Besides, there's no way she could plant a bomb without the others noticing. If she had been carrying any suspicious package, it would have been obvious.

"Right. Maybe after everyone has evacuated, the bomb will be delivered by courier? These days, you can schedule deliveries with pretty precise timing—"

In desperation, I said the first thing that came to mind, drawing from my current (soon-to-be-former) job—a bomb delivered by a courier. After everyone's evacuated and the building is empty, it could be left in the delivery box—it's a rather comical and amusing idea. Appropriately surreal, and above all, artistic.

Well, speaking as a driver who's had his van blown up, delivering a package exactly at 8 PM sharp would be an impossible request—

"—What did you just say?"

Then.

Ms. Kyoko suddenly stopped muttering—she raised her head, her eyes shining brightly behind her glasses—and looked at me.

'What did you just say?'

Now that I think about it, that famous detective line hadn't come up yet—her signature phrase.

Huh? But what did I just say?

"I-I said... the bomb might be delivered by courier... but no, that's impossible, right? These days, security checks for dangerous goods are done everywhere—"

"That's it!"

Ignoring my excuses, Ms. Kyoko shouted loudly enough for the entire investigation team, who had begun evacuating, to hear.

"Someone! Bring me a map!"

A map? What does she need a map for? Is she planning to search for the shortest route for the courier to reach the museum, like some kind of car navigation system? Is this really the time for that?

Only ten minutes left!

But Ms. Kyoko, who had suddenly regained her energy, couldn't wait for everyone's bewildered reactions to settle. She dashed out to the shop corner next door, which, of course, was now empty. Does the museum shop even sell maps? No, she grabbed a catalog of the museum instead—on the back cover was an access map showing how to get to the museum.

How convenient that she managed to find what she needed with what was available—but it seemed this wasn't exactly what she was looking for, as she frowned in dissatisfaction.

"Not this kind of map—I need something more like a transportation network map!"

"A—A transportation map? You mean, like for trains and such?"

"Yes! Ah, but of course, there's no way we'd have something like that here, right? In that case—"

"If it's a transportation map you need, I can pull one up online."

Catching up, Officer Haraki offered the tablet.

"Can I kiss your magical board!（あなたの魔法の板にキスさせて！）" Ms. Kyoko exclaimed in delight, for some reason in English, as she snatched the tablet from Officer Haraki—though, of course, she hadn't lost her composure to the point of actually using her lips to operate it.

On the screen, Officer Haraki had already split the display between a map app and a train schedule app, with the scale aligned on both. But even seeing that, I still didn’t understand what Ms. Kyoko was getting at.

What on earth did I just say anyways?

I mean, Assistant Officer Tobirai did call from a public phone at a station—but she wasn't seriously suggesting that we all hop on a train and go apprehend her there, was she?

That wasn't even a last-ditch effort.

It was like trying to handcuff a criminal after they've already been indicted.

"It’s the other way around. Assistant Officer Tobirai is coming here, on the train."

"Ms. Kyoko... what are you saying... please, enough with the jokes. There’s no way Assistant Officer Tobirai would turn herself in—"

I hardened my heart and spoke frankly, thinking she wouldn't understand unless I did—but it was I who didn't understand. It was so obvious.

Looking at the two maps side by side, it became blatantly clear.

"Ah—"

The station where Assistant Officer Tobirai had called her friend at the station—and the line that connects it to the museum’s nearest station.

The subway tracks.

They run directly beneath the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art.

42

In this country, there’s no one who doesn’t know the terror of earthquakes. And there’s no one who doesn’t take pride in the clockwork precision of our public transportation. Upon checking (‘Thank you, magical board!’), we found that at exactly 8 PM, a subway train would pass directly beneath the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art—it had just now departed from the station where Assistant Officer Tobirai made the call, at 7:53 PM.

A 7:53 express train.

It was scheduled to arrive at the nearest station at 8:03 PM, without stopping.

But it would never make it there. The bomb brought on board would detonate just before then—inside the underground tunnel!

"Come to think of it, there wasn't a single mention of a timer in the warning video—because the one used in the parking structure was a timed bomb, we just assumed it was the same," Officer Yura said, but that wasn't it. We weren't assuming, we were cleverly misled—'QRETA 9010' had only said it was a 'bomb of the same scale.'

Minimal force, maximum effect.

Setting off an explosion in an underground tunnel is almost like triggering an earthquake—and if such a large explosion were to occur directly below, there's no way this museum, which doesn't appear to have been designed with seismic resistance in mind, would remain intact. It might not catch fire, but at the very least, it would be half-destroyed—unlike the parking structure, which was left charred but still standing, this would be the opposite result.

A comparative experiment...

"She never said she planted a bomb inside the museum—only that the museum would be targeted..."

Officer Yura groaned in frustration.

But that's how anyone would think, especially after seeing the 'demonstration' at the parking structure... However, if the target is the entire building rather than the exhibits inside, attacking from the outside is actually the logical approach.

"Assistant Officer Tobirai might've used the subway as her means of transport to get here as well, and in hindsight, that might have been a reconnaissance trip... But still, aren't underground tunnels built to be pretty sturdy...? Would the building really collapse just because a bomb went off down there...?"

Officer Haraki said doubtfully—or rather, he seemed unwilling to believe such an outrageous idea. That's right. Whether an explosion in an underground tunnel would affect this museum is something we won't know until it happens—after all, this was just '9010's' blueprint.

It's possible that, once executed, the result would be disappointing from her point of view—nothing more than a few exhibits falling off their shelves. Given Assistant Officer Tobirai's current mental state, there could easily be a miscalculation.

She might think that even a slight tilt, enough to render the building unusable, would be sufficient—at this point, our deductions are still conjecture based on conjecture, nothing's certain yet.

But there is one thing we can say for sure.

If this plan is carried out, everyone on that subway train will die.

8 PM.

It’s not exactly rush hour, but there would still be a fair number of passengers at this time—just thinking about how many people are on board is unbearable.

"D-Didn't Assistant Officer Tobirai say she didn't want to hurt anyone...?"

"Perhaps—her desire to avoid harm was likely limited to her colleagues. The ‘everyone’ she didn’t want to kill probably only included members of the bomb disposal team, or at most, the investigation squad."

Ms. Kyoko and myself tied to the pillars, Director Machimura and the museum staff were probably considered expendable—she insisted on evacuating the staff who had decided to stay behind because as long as they remained, her colleagues couldn’t evacuate either.

Or maybe it was because it would be unnatural for only her colleagues to survive, so it wouldn't do for us and the staff to die... The idea of causing no casualties was just a front, a camouflage for her true intentions.

In other words, even that was a fake.

The parking garage incident was the same.

She would make any sacrifice if necessary.

Or perhaps, given her goal, she even thought that a higher number of casualties would be more sensational and attract more attention—the twisted logic I had used to try to evacuate Ms. Kyoko suddenly took on a horrifying irony.

If we don’t stop Assistant Officer Tobirai, people will die. A lot of people.

Not cars, not artworks, not buildings.

People. Innocent people.

"Can’t we contact the driver and have them stop the train!? If we inform the railway company—"

Officer Yura, in a panic, started giving orders—but then immediately retracted them.

"No, if the train stops, she'll realize her plan has been discovered and might press the switch right then and there—she might still believe it would have the desired effect. I don't think Assistant Officer Tobirai is in a state to make rational decisions anymore."

"But... if she does that, Assistant Officer Tobirai herself would die too, wouldn't she? She'd be blown up—"

It was too late. My sentimental imagination that she might commit suicide somewhere far away had hit the mark—only that 'somewhere' was right here, close by.

She would probably make an excuse to herself, saying that the only way to absolutely control the timing of the explosion was to get on the train herself—she would probably think of a reason why she had to die, such as, 'If I just planted the bomb on the train, it might be treated as a suspicious object and disposed of.'

Of course, that reasoning is correct. But it's also wrong. It's the ultimate end of a death wish.

Assistant Officer Tobirai said she didn't harbor any hatred toward anyone—that might actually be true. But the ones who will die are those she doesn't hate, people who are not only innocent but have absolutely nothing to do with this.

During this exchange, the current time had reached 7:55 PM—by now, the train had likely passed the first of the two stations between its starting point and its destination. No matter how fast we are, we can't outrun a moving train—and the fact that the explosion will happen while the train is in motion, instead of at a station, makes it all the worse. Won't it turn into a ball of fire after the explosion?

Five minutes left.

It's now down to 300 seconds—framing it in seconds instead of minutes makes the remaining time feel more real. And with that realization, our last hope that there might be no casualties vanished completely—as our deductions progressed, the situation grew more and more hopeless.

"At this point, there's nothing else we can do."

With no more mysteries left to unravel, the Forgetful Detective, having exhausted all options, finally uttered words of resignation.

"We can only appeal to the conscience."

(300…)

The fact that 'QRETA 9010', or rather, Assistant Officer Tobirai, had hinted so blatantly—if indirectly—about the location of the bomb, which she hadn't even told her friend at the police station, puzzled her. But strangely enough, she didn’t regret it at all.

When she analyzed herself, almost as a way to pass the time, she thought it was probably because she was happy—happy not to be recognized as the ace of the bomb disposal unit, but as a criminal. Even though Ms. Kyoko might have heard about her personal background from her friends at the police station, she didn’t treat her as a 'poor person'—she didn’t view her as a 'tragic victim.' Being judged as just another criminal rather than being praised as a young ace felt like a more genuine form of recognition.

She wondered if involving Ms. Kyoko had really been just a ploy to buy time. When she heard the rumors about the Forgetful Detective, whose memory resets every day, she felt envious—because there were so many things she wanted to forget.

But maybe that’s not all there was to it.

'Perhaps, deep down, I really wanted to be stopped—whether by the police, a detective, or even someone like you.

Now, I realize.

If someone were to stop me, I would’ve wanted it to be you.'

(275…)

Before her self-analysis turned into self-pity, she shifted her thoughts—either way, it was too late now. Assistant Officer Tobirai had already boarded the 7:53 PM express train. From here on, the efficient public transit system would automatically carry her to ground zero.

She had calculated it over and over.

This train would pass directly beneath the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art at precisely 8:00 PM—of course, there would inevitably be some margin of error, but then again, every clock has its margin of error. Assistant Officer Tobirai was carrying explosives that accounted for that—literally "carrying" them. Perhaps there was a little more explosive material than what was used in the parking structure, even though she had claimed it was the "same scale," but that much could be considered a minor indulgence.

(250…)

At that moment, the onboard announcement played: "If you notice any suspicious persons or objects, please inform the train crew or station staff…" Suspicious objects, huh? Setting aside the multi-story parking garage, which was more of an identity than a territory for Assistant Officer Tobirai, it would have been impossible to bring a bomb into the museum and plant it without being noticed by her colleagues in the bomb disposal unit, but the same conditions applied to the train.

That's why she brought it onto the train herself. She was aware that she might just be using that reasoning to justify her own suicide—but she couldn't come up with a single reason why she shouldn't kill herself.

She had packed the homemade bomb into a daypack, and following train etiquette, she wore it on the front rather than her back (on the front? Why would anyone do that?). Over this, she wore a maternity dress, completely different from her usual simple style—in other words, she was disguising herself as a pregnant woman.

Like a smuggler.

No one suspects a pregnant woman—no one suspects a baby. The "baby on board" badge is regarded as almost sacred. If there's anything as delicate as a baby, it's a bomb. Well, it's true that a bomb is as delicate as a baby, and in hindsight, most of this crime was just a misuse of knowledge she had acquired from the police—that alone disqualified her from ever being involved in an investigation again.

Even though Ms. Kyoko had said they might work together on a case someday, that just wasn't possible—even if Ms. Kyoko forgot, Tobirai couldn't. Ever. Not that her "ever" would last for much longer—

(200…)

So, she consciously tuned out the rest of the train announcement—"Next stop, Museum of Contemporary Art…" "Next stop, Museum of Contemporary Art…" Even though the train would never reach that station.

She had no reason to worry about fingerprints (wearing gloves under these circumstances would only draw attention), and of course, she had not only changed her outfit but also her hairstyle (she had put on extensions—poor Extension!). She had also removed her distinctive, oversized sunglasses. Wearing something like that would be like asking to be caught—her eyes

ached in the bright, uncomfortable world, but she only had to bear it for a little over three minutes.

There was no way anyone would know she had lost her sight. She deliberately avoided the tactile paving. Ironically, her "walks" with Extension had been the best possible training, and frankly, she felt more confident in her ability to see ahead than those pedestrians obsessively staring at their smartphones.

She could see shadows. She could see darkness.

Only darkness.

(150…)

Speaking of irony, according to her friend at the police station, Ms. Kyoko had figured out Assistant Officer Tobirai's motive—a motive that was supposed to be uncovered only after her death—because of a careless remark she had made about her reasons for joining the force. That fidgety movement of hers was probably because she was writing a hint on her belly, maybe with paint. The comparison between the Forgetful Detective using her belly as a notepad and 'QRETA 9010' hiding a bomb in her belly was unexpectedly amusing. When she found out later, would the Forgetful Detective let out a similar chuckle?

(120…)

Two minutes left.

She felt no regret whatsoever—she had vaguely expected to, she thought she might hesitate when the moment came, and had even secretly hoped she would—but she didn't. She felt no urge to stop and say, "It's not too late, let's just call this off." Just as her friend's persuasion had fallen on deaf ears, she couldn't convince herself either—she could only think that this was the only way she could finally die.

She wouldn't find peace or happiness, but she would find nothingness.

Her father, the collapse of her family, her resentment toward the museum—all of that probably didn't matter to her after all—she just wanted to die.

Ever since twenty years ago.

(100… 99… 98…)

And yet, she thought foolishly, if Extension could talk, if Extension had spoken up and stopped her, would she have stopped? It seemed Extension's condition had been exposed as well, and she wished the dog a good life in retirement… In hindsight, those walks disguised as guide dog training were just a way to indulge in her own sentimentality. It was probably just her who felt that unspoken bond between them—she might've just been dragging around a sick dog. It felt like she had lost her sight twice, but the second time, it was like half her heart had been taken away—she hoped Manicure would continue to thrive as a police dog. Becoming the ace of the bomb disposal unit was thanks to these eyes that could only see shadows, but it was also thanks to that dog's abilities.

Her only fear was that Manicure, literally a 'criminal's dog' instead of a 'police dog,' would be put down. But Ms. Kyoko's threat—her "threat"—had ironically eliminated that concern.

The bomb disposal team members who had likely overheard that call would surely ensure that didn't happen. Would it be too cynical to think that Ms. Kyoko had calculated all of this? However, that Forgetful Detective was shrewd enough to consider not only solving the case as quickly as possible but also the worst possible outcome.

(60... 50... 40...)

'Once it gets under a minute, the rest passes in no time.

Ah.

It's really over for me, isn't it?

Even with the moment so close, I still don't feel like stopping—in the end, I thought that maybe, just maybe, something like a conscience would kick in, but here I am, feeling absolutely nothing.

There's no sense of accomplishment from pulling off the perfect crime—just an endless feeling of loss, as if something is slipping away with each passing second.

Perfect crime? What a joke. Just because I didn't get caught doesn't mean it was perfect. Nothing went according to plan. The criminal details were exposed completely. They probably even figured out that I was using my father as an excuse to end my life. The shame alone makes me want to die.'

(30... 29... 28... 27... 26... 25... 24... 23... 22... 21...)

'The fact that I even dared to think I'd pulled off the perfect crime fills me with embarrassment, so let's force myself to think about something else.

With the hint that there was no bomb at the museum, I wonder if Ms. Kyoko has figured out the truth by now? Well, it doesn't really matter. I just hope she took the warning seriously and evacuated properly. I struggled so hard to avoid blowing up the bomb disposal team, but now, I find myself hoping that Ms. Kyoko, and even that young Kakushidate who partnered with her, make it out alive.

If only I had more people in my life who I could care about like this...

Maybe my life would have turned out differently.'

(19... 18... 17... 16...)

(15... 14... 13... 12...)

(11... 10... 9...)

'"Um, miss? If you'd like, you can sit here."

A voice called out to me from the front.'

44

8:03 PM.

A report came in that the express train had arrived at the station nearest to the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art—the suspect, Azana Tobirai, was detained after disembarking from the train by the waiting police officers. She offered no resistance and was quietly taken into custody—when I heard that, my legs gave out from under me, and I collapsed on the spot.

It might seem pathetic, but I was really on edge—Ms. Kyoko, seeing me like that, teased me with a smile.

"You should have evacuated instead of pushing yourself."

Even she had a relieved smile on her face.

I retorted, saying there was no way I could evacuate when Ms. Kyoko hadn't—it wasn't just the two of us. Officer Yura, Officer Haraki, the bomb disposal team, and most of the investigation

squad didn't evacuate. Instead, like the museum staff who had decided to stay put earlier that day, they gathered in the cafe area and waited with bated breath.

For that moment.

Not the moment when the explosion would happen underground—but the moment when Assistant Officer Tobirai, after all her meticulous preparations, would call off her crime.

'We can only appeal to the conscience.'

That's what Ms. Kyoko had said—but she didn't mean relying on Assistant Officer Tobirai's conscience. She meant relying on the conscience of the "people who had nothing to do with this" who would be caught up in the crossfire—bringing a bomb onto a train isn't easy.

Ms. Kyoko boldly assumed that if someone were to smuggle a suspicious item past the ever-watchful station staff, they would likely disguise themselves as a pregnant woman—the bomb disposal team didn't disagree with her. Those who knew Assistant Officer Tobirai well, the very members the criminal didn't want to involve, predicted that "Tobirai would use her experience as an investigator"—like a smuggler.

In that case, to maintain that disguise, Assistant Officer Tobirai wouldn't sit down in a train seat—even though it wasn't rush hour, the train would still be crowded, so she would be standing, holding onto a strap.

It was a situation full of 'ifs' and 'maybes,' but if, at that moment, with her mind preoccupied with her own thoughts, someone nearby offered their seat to Assistant Officer Tobirai, who was wearing a maternity mark—she might notice.

She might realize that the people she was about to involve in this were human beings.

'People who had nothing to do with this.'

If someone made a connection with her there—that would be the brake.

When a woman with a large belly appears, it's natural for people to offer her their seat—Ms. Kyoko bet on that basic level of human decency.

She bet their lives on it.

"Even if we had evacuated, the outcome would have been the same—why wait here for the result? It's not like we'd gain anything from it," Officer Yura said, his tone sarcastic, probably also relieved.

"I believe that the fact that I—and all of you—were here at the appointed time of 8 PM will act as a brake for Assistant Officer Tobirai in the future."

Ms. Kyoko shrugged as she replied.

"Perhaps, it might even serve as an accelerator for her to move forward."

So she had thought that far ahead?

If that's the case, that foresight was indeed a perfect display of the Forgetful Detective's remarkable ability to reach the solution in the nick of time.

Following the visit from her friend at the police station, the next person to visit Azana Tobirai, the former police inspector known as "QRETA 9010," was an unexpected figure—the Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami.

It was truly unexpected.

The Forgetful Detective, whose memory resets every day, should have completely forgotten about yesterday's chaos by now, shouldn't she?

"Oh no, I haven't slept a wink since then, so for me, it's still today."

How could that logic hold water?

Now that she mentioned it, her voice did sound a bit sleepy—perhaps she was still feeling the effects of fatigue. But surely, her fashionable flair was still intact, despite the rumors that she never wears the same outfit twice. It felt a bit awkward to be sitting across from Ms. Kyoko, separated by an acrylic screen, dressed in a shabby jumpsuit and stripped of her heels—Tobirai never cared much about fashion, but it made her feel terribly miserable. What kind of punishment was this?

Punishment for the bombing?

Well, whatever it was, if she could, there was something she wanted to ask Ms. Kyoko—she had given up on the chance to do so, but since the detective had come to see her, regardless of her intentions, she would seize this as the perfect opportunity.

"Even so, Ms. Kyoko. I'm surprised you actually believed what I said—that there was no bomb planted in the museum. I never thought you'd take my words at face value."

"It's not that I believed you. Until this very moment, I didn't even know what you looked like. It wasn't me who trusted you—it was everyone else. Even after it was revealed that you were

'9010', everyone, including Officer Yura who was leading the investigation, and the bomb disposal team, consistently continued to address you as 'Assistant Officer Tobirai,' using your rank."

"..."

"So, I considered your words, intended to merely induce an evacuation, as valuable investigative information worth analyzing."

I see...

Ms. Kyoko may have forgotten, but deducing that the perpetrator was someone within the police from the signature "9010" was based on the same reasoning. Although she was off the mark with that deduction, Tobirai had to admit she hit the bullseye with this one.

It was indeed a lead provided by Tobirai in her capacity as a police officer.

But that wasn't what she wanted to ask.

"...Ms. Kyoko, what exactly did you do?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. Yes, it's true that I was offered a seat and then... well..."

"You had a change of heart."

"Yes, I suppose I did have a change of heart. In that sense, you undoubtedly won the bet... but I can't help but think it was all a bit too coincidental."

Since losing her eyesight in the explosion, there have been times when people offered her a seat on the train—but it's not something that happened often. Maybe people felt embarrassed about seeming overly nice, or maybe they were hesitant, thinking it would be awkward. It was still an act that required some courage.

In fact, when she used the subway as a practice run from the multi-story car park to the museum, no one had offered her a seat. There had been unexpected occurrences and miscalculations—there were even moments when she had let something slip—but even so, that moment felt far too convenient.

Too good to be true.

It bothered her that something as rare as that could derail the "9010" plan—she spent a restless night stewing over it. So when Ms. Kyoko came to see her unexpectedly, she couldn’t resist asking her.

'Did you arrange something?'

"Oh, not at all. I just made a phone call—that’s all. I contacted the train company and asked if I could have a word with the conductor. I simply requested that they make one or two extra in-car announcements."

"In-car announcements?"

"If you notice any suspicious persons or objects, please inform the train crew or station staff—please refrain from using mobile phones near priority seats—please offer your seat to pregnant women or anyone who appears to be unwell."

Her shoulders slumped.

So that was it.

She had dismissed it as background noise and tuned it out the moment she got on the train to focus on the ticking clock.

By repeating familiar announcements, she nudged the passengers towards kindness... all with just a single phone call.

"You, the Forgetful Detective, reminded people of the spirit of giving up their seats—something modern society has largely forgotten."

"I only slightly increased the odds. It was still left to chance."

"...By the way, what kind of passenger was it that offered me their seat?"

"A high school girl. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her anything about you."

"I see. That’s good."

As expected from the fastest detective, she answered before the other even asked.

Judging by the voice, Tobirai had figured it was a teenager, but she didn’t want the person who offered their seat to a fake pregnant woman—to a bomber, no less—to have to carry that experience with them. She hoped the girl would continue to be the kind of passenger who offered her seat to those in need.

Well—even if the maternity dress was fake, she probably did look like she wasn’t feeling well.

"So... what brings you here, Ms. Kyoko?"

She had no more regrets. She felt relieved. Given that, she couldn’t very well invoke her right to remain silent after having her own question answered... What was her purpose for coming? Could it be a victory declaration of some sort? Tobirai may have said a bit too much on the phone, but if the other stayed up all night just to make a victory lap... she seemed easygoing, but maybe she was one to hold a grudge...

"Goodness, no. I just wanted to show you a video."

"A video?"

"Yes. I borrowed a tablet from Officer Haraki—what do you call it? Accessibility? If I set the screen brightness to its lowest setting, you should be able to see it, right?"

"Well, yes, vaguely. It’ll look like a shadow play with the contrast between light and dark."

Since her sunglasses were for protecting her eyes, she was allowed to wear them even in that jumpsuit—with the acrylic screen between us, and in this dim visiting room, the tablet screen shouldn’t be too bright for her to see.

"Um, how do I operate this... Oh, like this."

Ms. Kyoko seemed to be fumbling with it.

Right, the detective probably wanted to show her some video footage from the investigation—it was likely part of Okitegami Detective Agency’s thorough aftercare process, going over the evidence and testimonies in detail to wrap things up.

"Oh, by the way, Assistant Officer Tobirai—"

Though technically she was already 'former,' Ms. Kyoko still called her that, perhaps out of courtesy.

"Before we start, I wanted to let you know that Manicure will be taking a break from its duties as a police dog for a while."

"I see."

It was unavoidable. Tobirai should be grateful the dog wasn’t put down—she was too fixated on Extension. She should have thought more about what would happen to Manicure—way more. She should have at least dissolved their partnership before committing the crime.

"It’s unfortunate."

"Oh no, it’s actually very good news. You see, she’s going to have puppies."

"What!?"

She let out a high-pitched yelp—the guard standing behind her glared, and she quickly tried to lower her voice—but couldn’t.

"Puppies!?"

"Yes. You’ve already heard that she was placed in a pet shop owned by a veterinarian, right? That’s how they discovered Extension’s condition—and around the same time, they also found out Manicure was pregnant."

"..."

"I thought she seemed a bit chubby around the waist for a police dog—unlike me, of course."

Well, she didn’t care about Ms. Kyoko’s waistline... but she was left speechless. She wondered what kind of idiotic expression she must have had on her face.

Whose puppies could they be?—It was obvious. There was no one but Extension.

Both of them were pedigree working dogs, meant to pass on their lineage, so neither had been spayed or neutered, but still—it shocked her to realize that she was so out of it that she didn’t even notice.

It was more embarrassing than any of the mistakes she had made during this incident.

After letting her stew in her flustered state for a while, Ms. Kyoko finally spoke, clearly enjoying herself, "So, Manicure will be on maternity leave for a while. Even in the canine world, welfare and benefits should be properly respected."

Pregnant—carrying a baby.

"And so, at the very least, I’d like to keep Extension alive with some life-prolonging treatment until he can see his puppies. As her handler, I need your permission for that."

"O-Of course, by all means. Please, I beg you."

In a state of confusion, unable to think clearly, she bowed her head. Hearing this, Ms. Kyoko said, "I’m glad to hear that."

"When they’re born, please hold them for me, okay?"

"...You’re a cruel person, you know that? I’ll never forgive you."

Raising her head, former Assistant Officer Tobirai uttered her first words of resentment in her life... She now had a reason not to die. A reason she couldn’t die peacefully, quietly, without any regrets in that detention cell—'when they’re born, please hold them for me, okay?'

These words were far more threatening than the ones she had hurled at her over the phone.

"*Giggle*. Well then, come seek your revenge someday, whenever you like. I’ll have forgotten all about it by then, of course."

"I’ve lost to you, Ms. Kyoko."

This time, she meant it.

It was a genuine, heartfelt admission.

Ms. Kyoko, however, brushed off that declaration of defeat without much notice and said, "Ah, here it is, this is the video I absolutely wanted you to see." It seemed she had finally figured out how to operate the tablet.

'She's so focused on work, it's almost ridiculous,' Tobirai thought, dumbfounded. But the image that appeared on the tablet screen wasn't the crime scene investigation video she had expected.

"I stayed up all night making this video. I usually think things like this are just human vanity, but it was a suggestion from Mr. Yakusuke. Officer Yura and the bomb disposal team also helped out."

"...?"

Intrigued by her mysterious words and still shaken, former Assistant Inspector Tobirai squinted her eyes and leaned closer to the acrylic screen.

The figures on the screen were unmistakable, even if they were just silhouettes—Extension and Manicure. Extension was wearing a bow tie instead of a collar, and Manicure was draped in a pure white veil. The background music was the "Bridal Chorus" from the opera Lohengrin, composed by the maestro of dramatic music, Wilhelm Richard Wagner.

"I explained the situation to the pet shop owner, and before taking the dogs to the animal hospital, we arranged a modest wedding ceremony for them at the shop—a shotgun wedding, if

you will. I really wanted you to attend, Assistant Inspector Tobirai, but I couldn’t rest easy unless you at least saw the video. I wouldn't have been able to sleep a wink otherwise."

'So, she stayed up all night for this.'

And not just Ms. Kyoko—everyone who helped make the video. They did this for a traitor like her. And then there was Yakusuke Kakushidate, the one who had suggested it in the first place... She couldn’t even begin to imagine how angry he must be after being dragged into this whole mess for no reason.

"What do you think? We’re thinking of giving the two dogs a lovely new home as a wedding gift from everyone. Assistant Inspector Tobirai, do you happen to know a good architect? Take your time and think it over as you watch the ceremony."

"...Even if you say that, I can’t see it."

Even though the screen’s brightness was already set to the lowest level, former Assistant Inspector Tobirai couldn’t bring herself to look directly at the video playing on it.

"It’s too bright. I can’t see a thing."

For the first time in a while, Tobirai felt like her vision, which had been reflecting only the shadows of the world, was filled with light.

The light of hope for tomorrow.

Appendix

While Ms. Kyoko was having her "first meeting" with "QRETA 9010" in the visitation room of the detention center, I was about to be interrogated by Officer Yura in the same building—the police station—in an interrogation room. Since it was an interrogation room, of course, I was expecting to be interrogated.

I had assumed that the summons was punishment for knocking over the storage shelves in the archive, but to my surprise, that wasn't the case. Instead, I was told that an exhibit had gone missing from the Machimura City Museum of Contemporary Art during yesterday's commotion, and I was under suspicion of theft—apparently, Director Machimura had specifically named me in the theft report, so Officer Yura had no choice but to question me. He looked troubled as he explained this.

Hmm, I see.

Another false accusation.

I never would have imagined that being falsely accused would conveniently sweep under the rug my disgraceful act of kicking around the museum's prized art collection like that... Although "9010" wasn't aiming to steal the exhibits, it seems someone else had taken advantage of the situation. Incidentally, the missing piece was a very large bronze statue, something that couldn't be easily carried out. Perhaps Count Kakushaku had somehow gotten mixed up in all of this?

"What do you think, Mr. Kakushidate? Want to call a detective? She's right here in the building."

Officer Yura asked me this casually, as if he were reading me my rights as a suspect. I thought for a moment. "No, I won't call her," I replied.

"I'll manage to straighten this out on my own."

"I see. Well, then, let's begin the interrogation."

With a wry smile, Officer Yura nodded and switched to a more serious tone, throwing an unforgiving and utterly crucial question my way.

"Mr. Kakushidate, do you plan on getting a puppy?"

Appendix 2

The video of Extension and Manicure’s wedding, titled "Puppy Wedding," was uploaded to a video-sharing site by Officer Haraki, and held the number one spot in views for more than a full day without resetting.

You must have seen it too, right?

Afterword

Forgetting things is something that happens to everyone, of course, but the real issue that tends to blow things out of proportion is that even when a person forgets, everyone else around them remembers. Would you say this imbalance accelerates the situation, or brings it to a standstill? For example, if you forget a meeting time but everyone else also forgets about it entirely, nothing particularly eventful happens. Conversely, even if someone completely stands you up, if both parties forget about the appointment, it's not a big deal. The fact that it's not the case, however, is what makes it into a big deal. For the one who remembers, the forgetfulness of the other person regarding a meeting or a promise might be considered a bigger issue than the meeting or promise itself. Whether it's a misunderstanding or a difference in perception, when something you value is of no importance to the other person, it's what angers people the most. Sometimes, it even feels like an insult. Even though, logically, you know that they didn't forget because they don't care, or because it wasn't important to them, when you're angry, you forget that, don't you? I wonder if it will ever get easier? They say that time heals all wounds, but the one who inflicts the wound forgets, while the one who is wounded never does. The opposite is also true. Even if you are told, "You've forgotten the favor I did for you back then," the person being told this might just be left bewildered. They say anger makes you lose your senses, but if you're going to forget something, it would be better to forget the anger, not yourself.

So, this book is the twelfth installment of the Forgetful Detective series. Not only did I enjoy more than I expected to write about regulars like Ms. Kyoko and good ol' Yakusuke, but also about Officer Yura and "Double Dog Azana." Whether it's a good thing or a bad thing that even if Ms. Kyoko forgets everything, Yakusuke remembers everything about her—that's still unclear. And with that, this was "The Blueprint of Kyoko Okitegami".

This time, Mr. VOFAN illustrated Ms. Kyoko working in a café space. I had somewhat forgotten that Ms. Kyoko is someone who constantly changes her outfit, but after seeing this illustration, I won't forget it again. Thank you very much! Next up is "The Musical Score" and after that, "The Bulletin Board". Please look forward to them.

Nisio Isin

*TL Note: You might have noticed Yakusuke is back to his "False Accusations Master" nick in this volume, even if he should be "King" by now. That would place this story before "The Musical Score" (whose prologue we saw last time), "The Bulletin Board" (as we'll glimpse soon enough) and presumably the next two actual released volumes